



University of  
Chester

# **An Ethnography of the Language and Function of Spirituality within the Visible Recovery Movement**

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**J16657**

**September 2017**

**Word Count: 21,568**

**Dissertation submitted for the Degree of Master of  
Arts at the University of Chester in part fulfilment of the  
Modular Programme in Religious Studies**



## **Abstract**

Critiques of contemporary spirituality have scrutinised that language as functioning to perpetuate hyperindividualism. They contend that spirituality anaesthetises its adherents to the devastating suffering caused by capitalism. While these critiques are representative, they offer only a limited perspective and distort the diversity and functionality of spirituality in alternative contexts. In this dissertation, I argue that the grassroots spirituality of the Visible Recovery Movement (VRM) offers a viable challenge. It is diverse, deeply-meaningful and is located within a movement made up of friends, family and primarily people identifying as in recovery, usually from a disempowering substance use disorder. Many participants do associate with the 12-Step spirituality of programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Alternatively, those who do not affiliate with the 12-Steps conceive spirituality as, for instance, faith-based, mindfulness and self-help. Participants identify that language as a catalyst of autonomy, meaning, power and transformation. Data was gathered using the methods of qualitative ethnography within the VRM during Recovery Month, September 2016. Narratives of recovery and spirituality are both personal and social. Spirituality is embedded in vital self-care, responsibility, self-identity, inter-personal connection and altruism. During communal events such as the Recovery Walks, activists performatively celebrate recovery, endeavour for social change and challenge stigma.

### **Declaration**

The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

Signed: *L. Metcalf-White* Date: 24.9.2017

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to say a massive thank you to all of my participants without whom this project would not at all have been possible. It is down to your generosity and hospitality that I have been able to write this dissertation. I am privileged to have been able to listen to your stories and walk alongside you during Recovery Month. I am also grateful to Faces and Voices of Recovery UK for helping to facilitate this research. Secondly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Wendy Dossett, John Stoner and Tim Roberts from the Chester Studies of Addiction, Recovery and Spirituality (CSARS) group and Higher Power Project. Their encouragement, guidance and friendship has been both overwhelming and inspirational. Lastly, I would not be where I am today without the ongoing love and support of my parents, Helen and Peter, and partner, Caity Broadhurst. Alongside family, friends, and colleagues at the University of Chester, they have helped me most on my way in times of need. I am eternally grateful.

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## Introduction

The language of ‘contemporary spirituality’<sup>1</sup> has received significant scholarly attention over the last decade. Much of this literature has framed ‘spirituality’ as something to be contrasted with ‘religion’; albeit both terms are infamously difficult to define. Robert Fuller, in the *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (2001), cites a distinction between the two. Fuller notes: ‘the word *spiritual* gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the word *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions’ (6). Institutional religion, however, has typically been the subject of public and scholarly critique. Nonetheless, in this dissertation I focus on how and why scholars of religion have scrutinised spirituality (Carrette & King, 2005; Webster, 2012; Martin, 2015).

Paul Heelas, who along with Linda Woodhead has been criticised for leaning toward *emic* accounts of spirituality (Martin, 2015, 33), summarises critical evaluations:

New Age spiritualities of life, it is argued, are too superficial, too insubstantial, too vague, too inward looking, too selfish, and, of-course, too consumerized, too much ‘of’ and ‘for’ the pleasures or luxuries of secular consumption, to be other than inconsequential, ineffectual. Casual and largely irrelevant to important matters, they lack ‘impact’ (2008, 17).

I argue that these critiques of spirituality are convincing. Heelas’s rejoinder, however, arouses a curiosity. In his words: ‘spiritualities of life *are* able to make a *real* difference. As experienced and valued, ‘spiritual power’ or ‘force’ works’ (2008, 18). The propensity to universalise both of these polarised viewpoints is unhelpful and obstructs conducting nuanced and contextual analysis. In this dissertation, I argue that while spirituality is largely susceptible

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<sup>1</sup> I present the term contemporary spirituality in single inverted commas in this instance to semaphore the distinct contextual and etymological challenges with defining or quantifying it.

to these critiques, members of the Visible Recovery Movement (VRM)<sup>2</sup> engage with it in a functionally different way<sup>3</sup>.

The VRM is partially made up of people identifying as ‘in recovery’<sup>4</sup>, primarily, although not limited to, behavioural addictions, substance use disorders and mental health. Family, friends, recovery advocates and professionals all play a vital role in supporting the movement’s goals: to support those in need of help; to demonstrate that recovery is both possible and positive; and to challenge stigmatising discourses, especially around addiction. Localised recovery communities respond to a range of local and contextual issues, thereby endorsing diversity and inclusivity within their approaches to treatment. As many visible recovery affiliates do associate with 12-Step mutual-aid fellowships<sup>5</sup>, and thereby do identify with spirituality, it is an appropriate lens to explore this movement<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, I am not invested in substantively naming particular behaviour as ‘spiritual’, and neither do I prescribe that language as a solution to a substance use disorder.

In chapter one of this dissertation, I examine the literature that scrutinises spirituality as hyperindividualistic, superficial, and commodified by capitalist and neoliberal ideology. I argue that while it is an undoubtedly useful critique for scholars, it is at best only partially representative. The use of just textual sources and analogy is particularly lamentable and fails to capture the humanity of contemporary spirituality, alongside its complexity and diversity in a range of individual and social-life circumstances.

For this project, I examined the language and function of spirituality through the

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<sup>2</sup> I opt to use the term Visible Recovery Movement (VRM) as opposed to alternatives such as Recovery Movement. I do this specifically to highlight its visibility and presence.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, it is often the very same spiritualities among the VRM that are critiqued.

<sup>4</sup> When I use the term recovery I am aware of its limitations. It does not specifically denote abstinence-based or harm-reduction treatment methods, but is inclusive of the variety of treatment options that are available. While this dissertation focuses specifically on addiction and substance use disorders, the language of recovery encompasses responding to psychiatric trauma as well as mental health and sexual violence.

<sup>5</sup> The three 12-Step examples that I encountered during my fieldwork include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Al-Anon.

<sup>6</sup> There are many who belong to the VRM and identify with spirituality but do not associate with 12-Step. There are also people who do not identify with spirituality at all.



intimate lives and narratives, communities and activism of members of the VRM. Chapter two sets out the qualitative methodology (Silverman, 2013; Flick, 2014), that underpins this dissertation. I discuss my decision to conduct an ethnography within<sup>7</sup> the VRM using the methods of participant-observation and semi-structured interviews. I also examine my relationship to the VRM as both an ethnographer and, to an extent, an activist. To do so, I draw from the literature on engaged anthropology and ethnography (Bourgois & Schoenberg, 2009; Juris, 2008; Scheper-Hughes, 1995). Furthermore, I clarify my approach to gaining ethical approval and the practicalities of putting this into practice during fieldwork.

In chapter three, I argue that for participants within the VRM, the language of spirituality is to an extent, subjectively constructed. Moreover, it functions to empower and sustain a personal transformation<sup>8</sup> from the disempowerment of a substance use disorder<sup>9</sup>. Structuralist theorists<sup>10</sup> have aptly deconstructed spirituality as having perpetuated a romanticised view of the neoliberal individual. However, they fail to account for the functionality of concepts that my participants consider vital, namely, narrative; intra-personal identity; autonomous self-care; and responsibility. These concepts, I argue, are strongly tied to meaning making<sup>11</sup>, or what participants call a spirituality that affirms, supports and endures the demanding life transition from addiction to recovery.

Finally, chapter four offers a critical response to the view that spirituality is hyperindividualistic and narcissistic. I draw from participant-observation conducted within the VRM to argue that personal spirituality, meaning making and empowerment all intersect with

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this dissertation I refer to my relationality with the VRM as within. I do this to reinforce a sense of mutuality as the data was generated.

<sup>8</sup> While scholars have used this term, Dossett for example uses ‘radical transformation’ (2015b, 26), I use it more generally to describe that process of change from addiction to recovery.

<sup>9</sup> I use substance use disorder to refer more appropriately to my participants within the VRM who identified as in recovery from Alcohol or other drugs. However, at times I also use the term addiction to signal the terminology used in the scholarship and by participants themselves.

<sup>10</sup> Particularly Marxist and determinist social theories (see Martin, 2015) that attempt to account for the situational and circumstantial structures of power that are outside of an individual’s control.

<sup>11</sup> The term meaning making has been used by scholars such as Lois Lee (2015, 171). However, I use this term more generally to denote an understanding of spirituality as a search for and construction of meaning.

the values of community, family and social justice that are embodied within this movement. Activists engage in storying a powerful cultural narrative that celebrates and promulgates recovery as a worthwhile social phenomenon.

Additionally, during activities such as the Recovery Walks, participants performatively embody the values of their socially constructed spirituality among other people with a comparable experience of recovery, friends and family. These events take place in the month of September, or Recovery Month as it is known<sup>12</sup>. For many participants within the VRM, forming relationships is a vital aspect in their establishment of meaning and significant life transformation. At least in part, these events also challenge addiction-related stigma and structural inequalities. I examine the political engagement of the VRM as a way in which to further support my argument, that the grassroots spirituality<sup>13</sup> of this movement provides a unique case study that challenges those critiques of contemporary spirituality.

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<sup>12</sup> Activists dedicate themselves to celebrating recovery during this month at a range of events and activities.

<sup>13</sup> This term has been used by other scholars. See Robert K.C. Forman (2012) for a more general analysis of spirituality and Edwin Leidel (2004) for a discussion of Celtic spirituality. I use this term differently. My use of grassroots spirituality reflects the specific language used in the context of the VRM.

## Chapter 1

### Contemporary Spirituality meets Critical Theory

Alongside patterns of secularisation<sup>14</sup>, religious revivalism and fundamentalism, are those that concern the growth of the ‘spiritual, but not religious’ (SBNR) (Fuller, 2001). While more people supposedly depart from organised religion (Bruce, 2002), the emergence of contemporary spirituality<sup>15</sup> signals a divergent shift in patterns of belief and practice. Sociologist of religion, Douglas Davies (2012), characterises spirituality as an ‘engagement in self-fulfilment through self-directed ‘choice’’ (211) as well as ‘accounts of depth, worth and quality of human experience’ (211). In this chapter, I focus on critiques of contemporary spirituality (Carrette & King, 2005; Žižek, 2009; Masters, 2010; Webster, 2012; Martin, 2015). I critically examine this scholarship, identifying several weaknesses that support my argument, that at best, these evaluations are partial.

I scrutinise the claim that spirituality is an ideology of hyperindividualism that drives egotism and narcissism. I then examine the view that spirituality perpetuates capitalism and neoliberalism, and that it contributes to the problems of modern society by enabling people to cope with suffering, just enough to sustain their tacit engagement. Finally, I analyse the argument that spirituality is superficial and lacks authenticity.

This dissertation does not attempt to completely jettison the claims of these critiques, as they certainly do have their place. My aim instead is to challenge and disrupt the universality

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<sup>14</sup> Scholars such as Steve Bruce (2002) argue that traditional religiosity is in decline, primarily in Britain, Northern Europe, and North America. The secularisation thesis conceived of in Bruce’s words, ‘the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy’ (2002, 3). While quantitative data (Bruce, 2002) detailing church attendance offered evidence of sorts, significant critiques and revisions of this thesis have been made. The thrust of these, as Grace Davie puts it, surrounds ‘persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the undeniable decline in churchgoing’ (Davie, 1994, 94).

<sup>15</sup> The term contemporary spirituality should of course not be glossed over in terms of definition. This dissertation follows the literature on the subject (Fuller, 2001; Tacey, 2004; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Heelas, 2008; McAvan, 2012; Mercadante, 2014), but primarily my participants’ understanding and conceptions of that term. In this sense, spirituality acts as more as a signifier.

of these views. More specifically, what I argue throughout this dissertation therefore, is that the grassroots spirituality of the VRM engages with spirituality in a functionally different way and does not therefore fit with these limited criticisms.

### **Contemporary spirituality as hyperindividualistic and narcissistic**

What sets contemporary spirituality apart from supposed organized religion, is its individualisation, or what David Tacey calls ‘individual pathways to sacred meaning’ (Tacey, 2004, 39). Contemporary spirituality draws as much from popular culture as it does ‘religious’ symbolism (Lynch, 2005; McAvan, 2012). Moreover, the language of the SBNR is also closely associated with wellbeing and the New Age (Heelas, 2008).

Scholars have, however, identified aspects of contemporary spirituality which they argue are deeply concerning. Drawing from Marxist and Durkheimian theory, Craig Martin (2015) critiques the supposed hyperindividuality of spirituality. He contends that ‘the ideology of individualism does not make people more individualistic, but rather masks the extent to which “individuals” are collectively constituted’ (6). Moreover, Martin claims that humans do not have control of their lives and that apparently free choices are ‘determined by conformity to a logic of distinction and consumption’ (2015, 51).

His analysis has currency, especially regarding the embeddedness of the individual amid the social. Nonetheless, his argument is overly-deterministic and polarises the debate over whether humans have agency or are compelled to act in accordance with the powerful structures that can govern one’s life. Martin presents humans as automatons. This approach fails to capture a sense of the minor, but complex, resistance and negotiation strategies of daily life. Even if individuals are indeed ‘collectively constituted’ (Martin, 2015, 6), there remains an element of vital subjectivity implicit in human struggle that Martin fails to account for<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Something that post-structuralist and gender theorists have pointed out (Butler, 1990).

Religion scholar, David Webster, asserts that the hyperindividuality of spirituality causes people to be ‘selfish, stupid and miserable’ (2012, 17). Furthermore, it encourages individuals to desire something fashionable and personalised (17). For instance, he writes: ‘Put a Buddha on your mantelpiece to indicate to visitors that you have a spiritual side, that you may be dull and selfish, but you acknowledge a little counter-culture influence’ (2012, 51). While there is an undoubtable sense of individualism and consumption among the ‘spiritual marketplace’ (Roof, 2001), Webster’s caricature is outlandish and lacks nuance. While there are grounds for viewing spirituality as functioning to serve egotistical interests, universalising this claim recites the inaccuracies made by academics with a tendency to essentialise, as warned against by Ron Geaves (2005)<sup>17</sup>. Webster further notes that spirituality ‘makes us into idiots’ (2012, 42). This is both unconvincing and lacks scholarly qualification. Webster’s rhetoric, designed provocatively, offers little functionality for spirituality other than hedonistic and indulgent naïveté.

To an extent, that critique of spirituality does offer a useful, but yet partial assessment. Both Craig Martin and David Webster’s analysis lack a sense of awareness of the alternative functionalities beyond the caricature of spirituality as constituting determined and selfish ideologues. Furthermore, these critiques undermine the prevalence of individual spirituality within contemporary society. Sociologists, Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (2006), argue that spirituality has considerably more social and public significance than is recognised. They use the workplace as an example of spirituality in the ‘public domain’ (201). Conceptualising spirituality only in terms of the individual, represents a lack of theorizing around the social interactions of those identities. The tendency to universalise this view paints an unsophisticated depiction. It is also the case that the individualisation of organised religion has occurred. As

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<sup>17</sup> Although Geaves’s criticism is aimed at the World Religions paradigm, it also I argue applies to the complexity and diversity of spirituality.

David Lyon aptly notes: ‘belief is demoted, experience promoted’ (2000, 94). Evidently, religion is likewise susceptible to the individualism and consumer choice of postmodernity.

Because of spirituality’s focus on the individual, critics argue that it has little or no commentary on collective or public issues, and therefore has nothing to contribute to social justice agendas. In fact, its presence they argue may considerably undermine social justice. Furthermore, Webster notes that spirituality is ‘such thin-soup for so meaty a challenge’ (2012, 54). This view seriously undermines, on the one hand, concepts such as self-care. As the feminist writer Sara Ahmed notes, that is the ‘painstaking work of looking after ourselves [because] we matter’ (2014). On the other hand, it fails to capture the powerful relationship between the language of spirituality and political liberation activism such as feminist, womanist, Queer and LGBT. These examples challenge the hegemonic construction of spirituality as purely selfish and passive and demonstrate that it can be embedded both socially and politically.

### **Spirituality, capitalism and neoliberalism**

The relationship between contemporary spirituality, capitalism and neoliberalism has been noted by the critical theoreticians. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in their influential text *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005), note that ‘from Feng Shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, from Christian mystics to New Age gurus, “spirituality” is big business’ (1)<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has also argued that ‘the reason for this shift of accent from religious institution to the intimacy of spiritual experience is that such a meditation is the ideological form that best fits today’s global capitalism’ (2009, 28). This view represents the commodified language of spirituality available for consumption.

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<sup>18</sup> A good example of self-help literature is the book by John Parkin; *F\*\*k It: The Ultimate Spiritual Way* (2009). At one point, Parkin suggests that ‘when you say *F\*\*k It*, you carry out a spiritual act’ (2009, 1). An act that allows you to, ‘give up, let go, stop resisting and relax back into the natural flow of life itself’ (2009, 1).

Craig Martin critiques the supposed hyperindividuality of spirituality as the perpetuation of his notion of ‘capitalist theodicy’ (2015, 144). This describes the way in which ‘capitalist ideology, like Christian theology, halts explanatory causal regresses at individual agents...to explain the fact that people suffer in the capitalist system’ (2015, 144). Ipso facto, blaming individuals absolves structural forces, such as capitalism, of their exertion of power (144). Martin’s argument is convincing; however, it misses the functionality of individualism and spirituality for alternative reasons other than propping up capitalism and neoliberalism. More attentive and less polemical studies have identified vast diversity in expressions of spirituality<sup>19</sup> and how they function. Considering this, critiques of spirituality are valuable but provide a deficient and narrow characterisation<sup>20</sup>.

Attempts are made to acknowledge some diversity among spirituality. However, these are often based on polarisations which further privilege the critical perspective. Carrette and King’s typology (2005), for instance, includes both ‘capitalist spiritualities’ (20) and ‘business ethics/reformist spiritualities’ (18). They also include ‘revolutionary or anti-capitalist spiritualities’ (17). The latter comprises notions of social justice and a rejection of profit making (17). Examples include: ‘Islamic notions of a just economy and universal brotherhood, Buddhist notions of enlightened re-engagement with the world for the sake of alleviating the suffering of others [and] the deep ecology movement’ (2005, 18). This typology, nonetheless, still fails to capture that diversity. It simply reverts to a quasi-religious understanding of

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<sup>19</sup> See Flanagan and Jupp’s edited collection entitled *A Sociology of Spirituality*, (2007).

<sup>20</sup> I argue that this limitation is further evidenced when Martin notes how spirituality is ‘very middle-class’ (2015, 73) and ‘well-suited for privileged, bourgeois liberals who benefit from the existing social conditions but nevertheless want to feel “religious” or “spiritual”’ (8). This reflects a strawperson style of argumentation. It is clearly limited and dismisses the language of spirituality as potentially important for those who would not fit into a middle-class category. Many of my participants were unemployed and from working-class backgrounds.

spirituality<sup>21</sup>. In a sense, it almost reengineers the simplicity of the much-critiqued ‘World Religions’ paradigm<sup>22</sup>, masked as spirituality, and lacking nuanced analysis.

### **Spirituality, superficiality and the quest for authenticity**

Contemporary spirituality is critiqued for its alleged superficiality and lack of authenticity<sup>23</sup>. Scholars note that it is a construct designed to better critique organized religion. Craig Martin (2015), for instance, contends that apologetic scholars ‘affiliate organized religion with obedience, deference to authority, collective conformity, and iron cages, while by contrast they affiliate spirituality with openness, freedom, options, and individual choice’ (4). In this instance, Martin’s reductionist analysis focuses more so on the substantive aspects of these concepts than it does the functional. He also calls organised religion a ‘crypto-normative rhetorical device’ (2014, 183). Nonetheless, his critique of the SBNR is itself largely normative and fails to account for any multiplicity among those people identifying with that language.

David Webster’s term ‘faith-lite’ (2012, 17) illustrates spirituality as lacking authenticity. He argues, that it comprises a ‘failure to make demands of us’ (17-18). This criticism draws from the concept of “hyperreality” associated with philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco. Hyperreality describes the paradigm noted among postmodern scholars, whereby humans have what Eco calls a “faith in fakes” (1990). Contrasted with ‘reality’, and bound up in consumer culture, hyperreality in Eco’s words is the paradigm for which ‘imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake...falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of "fullness," of horror vacui’ (8). This criticism, to

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<sup>21</sup> Returning to the quote from Carrette and King cited earlier: ‘from Feng Shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, from Christian mystics to New Age gurus’ (2005, 1). There appears to be a disparity between the expressions of spirituality that Carrette and King consider anti-capitalist, and those that are supposedly capitalist.

<sup>22</sup> See Geaves, (2005)

<sup>23</sup> This has also led to work on spirituality more generally that presents it rather passively and therefore fails to acknowledge the power and sense of meaning that many who identify with that language discuss.



an extent, is convincing and fits with a view of spirituality and consumer commodification. Rather problematically, however, it seems to rest on the assumption that religion is the opposite. Theologian, Linda Mercadante, presents a useful qualitative analysis of spirituality in *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (2014). However, her typology draws from passive and inconsequential rhetoric. Her five-fold typology includes ‘dissenters’, ‘casuals’, ‘seekers’, ‘explorers’, and ‘immigrants’ (52). Mercadante, albeit subtly, presents the SBNR as devoid of anything that could potentially produce authentic meaning or power, unlike theology, which she presents much more earnestly in her analysis.

David Webster further asserts that contemporary spirituality also perpetuates a distortion of ‘truth’ claims (2012, 31). In his words, accepting multiple truths, ‘is a misreading of liberal, well-intentioned, accounts at social inclusivity being over-extended’ (31). On the one hand, there is a sense in which Webster’s rejection of the postmodern deconstruction of metanarrative is convincing. On the other hand, he engages in a quasi-theology or philosophy of sorts in his discussion of truth. While there is a useful ethical and political thrust to his argument, it is apposite to query whether the endeavour of a religious studies scholar includes the search for supposed truth. This is not to reject a critical approach. Indeed, this dissertation does take a functionalist and social scientific approach. Such critical analysis, I argue, does not necessarily have to comment on what James Cox (2010) calls the ‘alleged truth or falsehood of religious claims’ (148). At the very least, however, these critiques should have accounted for the diversity and plurality among that language of spirituality.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter is not an attempt to either persuade the reader that critiques of spirituality are unworthy of consideration or that this dissertation will counter all of its claims. Indeed, they are largely appropriate and do have their place in the critical religious studies canon. My aim

is instead to destabilise the hegemonic universality of their grand theorising. Therefore, I present the case that there are alternative spiritualities that do not fit this lens. My intention is not to act apologetically, but to offer an example that challenges the narrow ideas discussed in this chapter. My specific focus is the language and function of spirituality within the Visible Recovery Movement. This rejoinder attempts to curtail the tendency for these critiques of be assimilated into discourses in academic and wider-culture. Such views perpetuate simplistic and limited caricatures that buttress a hegemony, whereby to identify with spirituality, is to be nothing more than an extension of capitalism and neoliberalism.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

This chapter describes the focus and research design of this project. It justifies the methodologies and methods that I have undertaken, clarifies the approach to ethics and analysis, and details my positionality as an ethnographer. I further examine the relationship between this methodology and the project's research puzzle: 'Does the spirituality of those in recovery from addiction, particularly within the Visible Recovery Movement, offer a viable challenge to critiques of the SBNR?'

#### **Focusing on spirituality within the Visible Recovery Movement**

In chapter one, I set out the critiques of contemporary spirituality (Martin, 2015; Webster, 2012; Masters, 2010; Žižek, 2009; Carrette & King, 2005). I argue, however, that these are at best, only partially representative of that language. In this dissertation, I examine the grassroots spirituality of the Visible Recovery Movement (VRM), as a unique case study to challenge the aforementioned criticisms. The spirituality of people in recovery from a substance use disorder functions in a way that does not mirror the narrow caricatures.

The VRM is made up of networks of people, identifying as 'in recovery'<sup>24</sup>, and their friends, family, and professional supporters who engage visibly with communities and also wider-society around a range of issues including addiction, homelessness, mental health, health and wellbeing, shame and stigma. Made up of localised and autonomous communities that embody what William White calls 'Cultural and Recovery Pathway Diversity' (2013, 2), the movement encourages strategies for positive, recovery-affirming, grassroots-level activism.

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<sup>24</sup> I present these words in double inverted commas to signify the difficulties of defining being a person in recovery. For a discussion of this regarding the Visible Recovery Movement see Best *et al* (2016). I deal with this in more detail in chapter three and four.

Many members do belong to abstinence-based, 12-Step mutual-aid fellowships such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), while several others participate in programs including SMART recovery, detox, residential rehab, harm-reduction, and one-to-one therapy. A defining feature of the VRM are its public celebrations, including Recovery Walks, rallies, concerts, communal sleepovers and conferences. These establish a greater degree of recovery visibility and presence within both local and national communities.

I decided on the VRM due to my conference assistance work with the ‘Chester Studies of Addiction, Recovery and Spirituality’ (CSARS) group and Higher Power Project (HPP). It was during this time that I first learnt of the social phenomenon gathering momentum in the United Kingdom<sup>25</sup>. Alongside spirituality, I was also interested in the grassroots-level activism of the movement and its endeavour for positive health and wellbeing and meaningful social change. At least in part, my argument is therefore deductive. I begin with the hypothesis that the VRM offers a viable counterpoint to claims that contemporary spirituality is narcissistic, hyperindividualistic and apolitical.

This dissertation focuses on the diversity of grassroots spirituality within the VRM. I deal with my use of that term in the next chapter. I argue that the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is not an authoritative and fixed metanarrative but emerges contextually and experientially. Significant attention has been paid to the relationship between recovery from addiction and spirituality within 12-Step mutual-aid fellowships such as AA, NA and Al-Anon (Dossett, 2013, 2015a, 2017; Kelly, 2016; Kurtz & White, 2015). Research located outside of 12-Step programs finds the language of spirituality also existent in self-help literature, yoga and mindfulness (Khanna & Greeson, 2013), acupuncture (Black *et al*, 2011), Native American

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<sup>25</sup> In *State of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement* (2013), William White comments that ‘Faces and Voices of Recovery US and the Association of Recovery Community Organizations (ARCO)’ were founded in 2001 (3). Furthermore, the movement had only begun emerging towards the end of the 1990s (1). In contrast, Faces and Voices of Recovery UK held their first Recovery Walk in 2009. This illustrates the VRM in the United Kingdom being a relatively new social phenomenon in comparison.

spirituality (Owen, 2014) and men and women's empowerment groups.

While the VRM has been explored among the scholarly literature (Best, 2012; White, 2013)<sup>26</sup>, it is also undertheorized with regard to the language and function of spirituality. As many members of the VRM do associate with spirituality, particularly 12-Step spirituality<sup>27</sup>, it is an appropriate lens to examine this movement. Alongside my interest in spirituality, nonetheless, this research project is rather unique in that it adopts an ethnographic methodology. This project draws on, but also differs from, the quantitative and theoretical research around recovery from addiction (Buckingham, 2013; Cloud & Granfield, 2001, 2008; Kelly, 2016).

## **Methodology and methods**

I opted to conduct qualitative ethnographic research for this project. During my fieldwork, I examined the language and function of spirituality by drawing on the daily lives, social networks and community advocacy of my participants within the VRM. The decision to qualitatively investigate spirituality within the VRM was drawn from a lacuna in critiques of spirituality, principally, the lack of personal testimonies and lived-experiences of participants identifying with that language. Instead, the critical scholarship draws predominantly from social theory, analogy and textual sources. The methodologies and methods I opted for addressed this omission.

Access to research sites (Silverman, 2013, 214-215) was negotiated between the CSARS group and I. Under the auspices of the CSARS (<http://csarsg.org.uk/>) and Higher Power Project (<http://csarsg.org.uk/research/the-higher-power-project/>) team, I was introduced to the organisers and stakeholders of Faces and Voices of Recovery UK at a planning meeting

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<sup>26</sup> See his regularly updated blog at: <http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/blog/>

<sup>27</sup> This is certainly not to imply that all 12-Step fellowship members associate with the VRM. As Wendy Dossett notes: in light of principles such as 'spiritual anonymity', individuals 'may find the attention-drawing practises of the visible recovery movement not in keeping with the very humility upon which they believe their recovery depends' (2015a).

for the National Recovery Walk which I attended in June 2016. During this time, I was able to explain my research and fieldwork strategies to the ‘gatekeepers’ (Silverman, 2013, 214-215), as well as answer any questions about anonymity and confidentiality.

An ethnographic (Gobo, 2017) methodology was chosen, primarily for a focus on the in-depth ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of participant-observation (DeWalt et al, 2011). Loïc Wacquant argues that ‘enactive ethnography; ‘based on “performing the phenomenon,” is a fruitful path toward capturing the cognitive, conative, and cathectic schemata (habitus) that generate the practices and underlie the cosmos under investigation’ (2015, 1). This kind of ‘immersive’ (Pollock, 2006) field-work which includes participation<sup>28</sup>, has enabled me to document and engage with the activities, experiences and philosophies of the VRM.

During my fieldwork, I attended and participated in a number of visible recovery events, activities and celebrations. During one weekend in Recovery Month, September 2016, I spent time with advocates at a national recovery conference, memorial service, communal sleepover, and Recovery Walk in Halton, Cheshire. These events were organised by Faces and Voices of Recovery UK (FAVOR)<sup>29</sup>. During my fieldwork, I also attended smaller Recovery Walks in Blackpool and Chester, a mutual-aid facilitation session, and several 12-Step fellowship meetings including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Participants were recruited after having conversations with those identifying as in recovery. Some were directed to me by members of the CSARS team. Others were determined to be suitable after conversations that emerged organically by walking alongside people during the Recovery Walks, and at some point, determining that they may be interested in being interviewed or completing a survey questionnaire.

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<sup>28</sup> I am especially drawn to the approach developed by Malinowski which semaphores a ‘step down from the veranda and enter *into* the social world’ (Button & Crabtree *et al*, 2015, 139).

<sup>29</sup> FAVOR UK describe themselves on their website as ‘A national charity, made up of individuals in recovery, their friends and families and Community Recovery Organisations. We are a policy advocacy movement that is taking on issues of discrimination, social justice and service access. A public and professional education movement, intent on challenging stigma’ (2017).

Much of the addiction and recovery literature draws from quantitative (Oakshott, 2014) and qualitative (Silverman, 2013; Flick, 2014) methodologies and contributes toward an evidence-base with policy and practice implications (Miller *et al*, 2006). While there are examples of ethnographies of addiction (Bourgois & Schoenberg, 2009; Brandes, 2002), there has been only little ethnographic engagement with recovery. This dissertation addresses this lacuna and the undertheorisation of spirituality within the VRM.

As an ethnographer interested in both micro and macro-level social contexts and structures, I draw from anthropological and sociological method and theory. Participant-observation is a vital tool for engaging with people and communities<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, it offers what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls the opportunity of ‘being there’ (1988)<sup>31</sup>. This method underpins my study of the language and function of spirituality within the VRM. It enables me to be absorbed into the social realities in which they partake. I was able to engage with participants; emotionally and physically experiencing what anthropologist Paul Stoller calls an ability to conceive a ‘depth of understanding both to recognize our human fragility and marvel at our social resilience’ (2015).

I designed my project around a ‘mixed-methods’ (Silverman, 2013, 62) approach to qualitative data-collection, primarily to address the diversity among my participants’ abilities and needs. Due to some participants feeling uncomfortable<sup>32</sup> with speaking or writing, this approach acknowledged potential preferences or in some cases vulnerabilities. The two methods employed were survey-questionnaires and semi-structured interviews<sup>33</sup>. Both followed the same format in terms of questions asked, with ‘flexibility’ built into the interviews

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<sup>30</sup> As Bourgois and Schoenberg write: participant-observation ‘forces academics out of their ivory tower’ (2009, 14). Indeed, it necessitates going out and participating in the worlds that our participants belong.

<sup>31</sup> Alongside immediately writing-up my field notes into a diary, I voice recorded entries into my mobile, especially during the Recovery Walks. I also took photographs during my participation in these activities.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed analysis of researching potentially vulnerable populations see Pranee Liamputtong’s *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (2007).

<sup>33</sup> These were recorded, with the permission of my participants, on my iPhone and a Dictaphone.

to allow further time for conversation and discussion (Flick, 2014, 197). David Best and colleagues' *Life in Recovery*<sup>34</sup> (2015b) survey was used as a model to build preliminary survey questions around length and style of recovery, education and occupation. During the Recovery Walk's in Halton and Chester, eighteen people identifying as in recovery, primarily from a substance use disorder, completed a survey questionnaire. A further eight participants took part in semi-structured interviews that lasted around twenty minutes each. Transcripts from the semi-structured interviews were written-up and then (e)mailed to participants for comments and critique. This allowed for both a degree of accuracy and mutual 'respect' (Lapan *et al*, 2011, 438-439) toward my participants.

The primary question<sup>35</sup> that I asked my participants focused on whether they identified with spirituality<sup>36</sup>, and if so, whether they could expand on what that meant for them. I asked: 'What does spirituality mean to you?' I also chose to ask participants about powerlessness as this concept, although closely tied to 12-Step programs, is featured within the literature around addiction and recovery (Orford, 2013). I designed my other primary questions around themes of empowerment, narrative, identity, and community. I asked questions about these concepts as they are embedded within the language of spirituality and meaning making, and furthermore, I considered them viable challenges to the critiques discussed in chapter one.

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<sup>34</sup> The questionnaire was launched by Sheffield Alcohol Support Services.  
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LifeinRecoverySurvey2015QHDDHV?sm=XAVi2JPeWMQ%2fNYEBCJ%2bVdFpgF4FXHFDp%2fkW51R%2bLCKA%3d> For Best *et al*'s analysis of the *Life in Recovery* survey see:  
<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/12200/1/FINAL%20UK%20Life%20in%20Recovery%20Survey%202015%20report.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> See *Appendix A* which is a copy of the questions that I used for both interviews and surveys.

<sup>36</sup> I follow my participants' use of the term spirituality as opposed to others like religious individualism.



I also engaged with the VRM online. The internet, particularly online social-media pages<sup>37</sup> and YouTube<sup>38</sup>, have been invaluable<sup>39</sup> for gaining a deeper insight into recovery. Participating in social media networks enabled me to find out about events such as the Blackpool Recovery Walk. Furthermore, I also collected a number of leaflets, pamphlets and materials to support my understanding of the VRM. These enabled me to conduct a more thorough thematic analysis of my interview and survey data.

### **Negotiating ethics and good academic practice**

Due to the inclusion of potentially vulnerable participants throughout my fieldwork, ethical considerations were of central importance for this project. Clearance for initial ethnographic research was gained in May 2016<sup>40</sup>. Alongside guidance from the University of Chester's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, I followed guidance provided in the British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association*<sup>41</sup> (2002). Likewise, I also followed the conventions of anonymity and confidentiality set out at the beginning of anonymous 12-Step fellowship meetings<sup>42</sup>.

As many visible recovery members do associate with 12-Step fellowships, and place a high importance on concepts such as 'spiritual anonymity' (AA, 2011), it was crucial to ensure that protective measures were taken. Participants needed to feel comfortable enough to take

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<sup>37</sup> Particularly useful were the Facebook and Twitter pages of Faces and Voices of Recovery UK (FAVOR), Cheshire Recovery Federation (CRF), and the Recoverists (formerly the (UKRF) UK Recovery Federation).

<sup>38</sup> Both the Chester and Halton Recovery Walks were filmed by David McCollom at DMC Media:

Cheshire Recovery Walk 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qEU0KxA0Ck>

FAVOR Walk 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8W6rIwwmxfg>

<sup>39</sup> Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) is a useful text that discusses in detail conducting ethnography on the internet. She frames the internet as both a "culture" (14) and "cultural artefact" (27) and discusses the application of ethnographic methods.

<sup>40</sup> See *Appendix D* for the letters of acceptance by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee.

<sup>41</sup> The British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association* contains detailed information on important aspects of professional sociological codes and conducts (2002). [https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa\\_statement\\_of\\_ethical\\_practice.pdf](https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> The *Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous* (2017) sets out a number of these conventions: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/AA-Traditions>

part in the research. All of those taking part were informed of the aims of the project, the data-collection procedure, and how consent would be managed. Each gave ‘informed consent’ (Flick, 2014, 54), signing two of the consent forms before any surveys or interviews were conducted. One of these was given to them to keep, as well as an information sheet, letter of invitation and my contact details<sup>43</sup>. The notion of ‘rolling informed consent’ (Piper & Simons, 2005, 56), ensured that this was sustained throughout the entirety of the project. Participants also had the option to withdraw at any time by means of communication. Procedures were also in place to discard all information from those who had decided to withdraw from the project. If participants had any serious concerns, the information sheet directed them towards the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities who they could contact.

## **The Researcher**

In the discipline of Religious Studies, debates have raged over whether scholars should take up position as ‘critics’ or ‘caretakers’ (McCutcheon, 2012; Omer, 2011, 2012). This dissertation is not intended to act apologetically on behalf of those identifying with the term spirituality. My methodological approach draws from the phenomenology of religion<sup>44</sup>. James Cox (2010) notes that this approach is centred on observing, describing and understanding religious phenomena ‘as they appear’ (49) alongside ‘*fostering empathetic interpolation*’ (52, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, as my examination draws on a functionalist analysis, it goes a step further than phenomenology by drawing from social scientific theory to explain and interpret. While functional approaches have been critiqued as potentially too inclusive (Cox, 2010, 8-9), I do this to avoid a substantive<sup>45</sup>, top-down, and potentially theological analysis of what spirituality is or is not.

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<sup>43</sup> See *Appendix B* for the letter of invitation *Appendix C* for the information sheet.

<sup>44</sup> This also allows for a sense of critical distance and reflection.

<sup>45</sup> During two different conference papers, one at the British Sociological Association (BSA) and another at the British Association for the Study of Religion (BASR), I was quizzed on why I had not approached it in this way.

I do however approach the term spirituality as meaningful for my participants. Wendy Dossett argues that ‘12-Steppers describe defects, fellowship, spirituality; and professionals describe recovery capital deficits, adaptive social networks and self-efficacy. They are not substantively different concepts; they are merely expressed differently’ (2017). I am not necessarily invested in naming the VRM or associated behaviours as spiritual. Instead, I examine my participants’ self-identification with that language, as well as how and why they use it. I avoid privileging or prescribing a particular understanding or essence of spirituality, but allow participants to speak for themselves.

Alleged insider and outsider positionalities are polarising. However, I do not identify as a person in recovery. I am not, therefore, positioned as an insider to the experience of disempowerment in active addiction, nor am I personally invested in any particular style of recovery. During my fieldwork in 12-Step fellowships especially, I self-identified as a researcher and did feel like an outsider. My positionality within the VRM required a greater degree of personal ‘reflexivity’<sup>46</sup> (May & Perry, 2011). I use this term to denote considering my positionality within and alongside the research process. As the VRM is inclusive of friends, family, supporters and professionals, I identified myself as belonging to the movement and supporting its activist endeavours. My engagement is driven, at least in part, ethically and politically. Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ notion of ‘militant anthropology’ (1995) establishes how scholarship can grapple with these issues. She writes:

In bracketing certain "Western" Enlightenment truths we hold and defend as self-evident...anthropologists may be "suspending the ethical" in our dealings with the "other." Cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live, and anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded (409).

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<sup>46</sup> This is not to suggest that my approach to 12-Step was not at all reflexive. I would avoid constructing strict boundaries between insider and outsider. Writing on the 12-Steps, Matthew Pianta reminds us that ‘the value of such virtues is not limited to the struggles of those in AA or other such support groups...In that respect, we *all* have something to learn, and to gain, from the Twelve Steps’ (2014, 194).

My participation in the Recovery Walks has been as both ethnographer and activist. While I inhabit a position of privilege as a white, cis-male postgraduate member of a university, to some extent, I embody the activist principles of the VRM. As Della Pollock writes: ethnographic activism means ‘putting one’s body on the line, whether that line is on the page or on the stage, in vigil or in protest, or connecting interlocutors in dialogue’ (2006, 325). Furthermore, Jeffrey Juris’ notion of ‘militant ethnography’ (2007, 164), applied directly to grassroots social movements, demonstrates a ‘politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation carried out from within’ (164). As part of this collaboration, offering something back to the movement is important<sup>47</sup>, both out of mutual respect and to help develop further their advocacy goals<sup>48</sup>. My participation at the Recovery Walks, conferences and communal sleepover demonstrates an active and immersive engagement with the VRM.



*Figure 1.* Photo of the author participating in the Chester Recovery Walk during Recovery Month 2016. (Facebook, Cheshire Recovery Federation (CRF), 2016). With permission from CRF.

<sup>47</sup> In September 2017, I delivered a paper entitled “Activism and the Academy: An Ethnography of the UK National Visible Recovery Walk” at the FAVOR UK conference in Blackpool before the Recovery Walk.

<sup>48</sup> I also draw somewhat from ‘action research’ (Lawson *et al*, 2015; McNiff, 2014). This approach has both policy and practice implications, focusing particularly of developing processes of social change.

## **Analysing the data**

My analysis is built around C. Wright Mills' work in *The Sociological Imagination* (1967). Here, Mills observes that the sociological imagination should focus on 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'public issues of social structure' (Mills, 1967, 8). On the one hand, I analyse the micro-structural and intimate lives of my participants, who, through creative agency and empowerment, attempt to sustain their recovery from addiction. On the other hand, I examine how this empowerment mediates the Visible Recovery Movement's collective engagement with social structures that perpetuate stigmatised inequalities that exist in tandem with addiction and substance use disorders.

The data including interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and questionnaire data, was analysed thematically (Saldana, 2015), although a discourse analysis (Stausberg & Engler, 2014) has examined recovery terminology in the literature, especially relating to 12-Step fellowships. Although I arrived at the research with themes in mind, I have attempted to see the bigger picture in my transcription, coding and thematising of transcript data. For reasons of flow and accuracy, I have occasionally altered spoken and written phrases. Furthermore, as is the convention among ethnographers and out of respect for participants' anonymity, all names are pseudonyms. Although I offered up the opportunity for them to choose their own, I frequently made that decision on their behalf.

My analysis, ontologically, is situated in a wider socio-political framework. I avoid overstating agency and according participants with neoliberal individual blame. This contributes to the moralising stigma of addiction-related disorders (Bourgois & Schoenberg, 2009). I construct my analysis around two particular ideas. Firstly, I examine the functionality of personal spirituality within the VRM. Drawing from post-structuralist and sociological theories around agency, I argue that spirituality empowers an incredibly demanding individual transformation. Furthermore, it inspires the development of a recovery narrative, the growth of

intra-personal identity, resilience and creativity, and health and wellbeing. Secondly, I argue that the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is embodied in the values of community, friendship altruism and collective activism. Drawing from social movement theory, I contend that the VRM is both a vehicle for both celebration and social change.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Personal Spirituality within the Visible Recovery Movement**

This chapter commences my critical analysis of the literature set out in chapter one. I base my findings on data gathered during fieldwork. I argue that while the spirituality of the VRM is undoubtedly tied to the ‘pick and mix’ (Tacey, 2004, 44) individualism of the SBNR paradigm (Fuller, 2001), it should nonetheless, not detract from its functional capacity to halt addiction. I begin by setting out two concepts: disempowerment and dis-ease. I examine their personal, circumstantial and for many, spiritual aspects, to exemplify the strength of my participants. Far from being shallow and hyperindividualistic capitalist ideologues, those identifying with the grassroots spirituality of the VRM are empowered to emerge from a state of disempowerment to that of empowerment<sup>49</sup>. Next, I examine spirituality as a powerful source of meaning making and vital self-care that helps participants mould their responses around the emotional and physical demands of treatment. While the critical scholarship denounces individualism as ideological (Martin, 2015), I provide a nuanced analysis around the functionality of agency and personal spirituality within the VRM. Finally, I discuss meaning making and spirituality as bound up in the positive and empowering concepts of intra-personal identity, narrative and responsibility.

#### **From Powerlessness to Power**

I begin by arguing that the paradox of disempowerment illustrates that spirituality within the VRM is not superficial as it gives rise to power. During my fieldwork, I observed that for many participants within the VRM, the language of disempowerment and dis-ease was significant. Disempowerment is not solely a personal experience, but can also be manufactured.

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<sup>49</sup> Empowerment is a complex concept that straddles the dynamism between notions of agency and structure. It is not however always linked to positive or ethical actions.

An example of this is the gambling industry, whereby tools and techniques are employed to acquire and sustain patronage for the goal of amassing greater revenue<sup>50</sup>. Structural disempowerment in addiction also exists along gendered (Sanders, 2009; Ray Knight, 2015), racial (Goffman, 2015) and class (Bourgois, 2003; Bourgois & Schoenberg, 2009) divides. As several participants associate with 12-Step programs, powerlessness is routine among many in the VRM. Step One of Alcoholics Anonymous reads: ‘We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable’ (AA, 1998, 59)<sup>51</sup>. One of my participants, Bryn, explained: “Powerlessness, it’s just about understanding or realizing you’ve got a problem that’s greater than your own willpower”. Another participant, Ralph, commented that: “I knew I had no control over my addiction or the substance I was taking. I knew that, every time I did it I was doing the wrong thing. I knew that in my head. But I couldn’t, quite like connect, I wouldn’t have ever attributed the word powerlessness to it”. Bryn and Ralph acknowledged that addiction was not an issue of willpower, but something greater. Moreover, Ralph extended his understanding of powerlessness beyond active addiction to include everyday life:

“This idea of powerlessness is bigger than just this specific thing addiction. This realisation that maybe, there’s other parts of your life which are like that. So, I had a think and you know, with the help of others, kind of started to realise that actually powerlessness is a concept that helps me to manage lots of other areas of my life.”

Ralph’s recognition of disempowerment in both addiction and everyday life, supported his view that although he believed that *he can* act in the world: “I just can’t control the outcome”. Another participant, Eryn, remarked: “I am powerless over people, places and things.

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<sup>50</sup> See Parke & Griffith, (2007); Griffith, (2009); McCormack & Griffith, (2013); Dow Schüll, (2014).

<sup>51</sup> For a useful discussion around feminist and gendered critiques of 12-Step powerlessness, see Sanders, (2009).



I am powerless over that voice in the back of my head that tells me I'm worthless"<sup>52</sup>. Eryn and Ralph both acknowledged the lack of control in their lives, especially prevalent during years spent actively using substances.

Jim Orford's understanding of addiction is advantageous<sup>53</sup>. In *Power, Powerlessness and Addiction* (2013), he claims that it comprises a loss of 'agency' and 'control' (63)<sup>54</sup>. Orford argues: 'addiction, with all its social connections, may be understood as a phenomenon associated with serious distortions of the relationships of power and people' (35). Moreover, the multiple intersections between individual and structural disempowerment culminates in what Orford further contends are circumstances that 'affect capabilities to lead a full life of their own choosing' (36). As my fieldnote illustrates:

During an end-of-course mutual-aid facilitation meeting before Christmas and New Year, the group, many of whom are transient members, were joined by a newcomer, an older gentleman, in his 60s. He had recently been released from Prison and was trying to 'get better', as he put it. He asked several questions, contributed to discussion and ate a whole box of grapes. After 30 minutes, he politely announced that he had to leave. The group speculated that the time of his departure, his "shabby" appearance, and recent Prison release, coincided with a meal at a foodbank (Ethnographic Field Diary, 2016).

Although it is difficult to speculate, this case highlights the demands of addiction recovery alongside experiences of social exclusion perpetuated by structural inequality. However, many people do manage to recover and build the necessary 'recovery capital' (Cloud

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<sup>52</sup> This recovery phrase is something that can be heard among 12-Step fellowship members, including those who belong to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) in particular.

<sup>53</sup> I am not personally invested in the 12-Step spirituality understanding of powerlessness. However, theoretically, I comprehend addiction as emotionally and physically disempowering for the individual. Furthermore, although many suggest addiction is a matter of willpower (see Peter Hitchens, 2012), these views fail to appreciate the functionality of admitting powerlessness over a substance or behavioural disorder.

<sup>54</sup> Orford defines addiction as 'a strong attachment that has formed to a particular class of object of consumption – an attachment sufficiently strong that the person concerned now finds it difficult to curtail consumption despite the fact that it is causing harm' (2013, 37).

& Granfield, 2008)<sup>55</sup> to stop the devastation of substance use disorders. I argue that it is evident, that for participants within the VRM, they are actively engaged in an emotionally and physically demanding ‘recovery process’ (Best, 2012, 63). This is the backdrop for my unique case study of spirituality within the VRM.

For participants associated with 12-Step programs, admitting powerlessness was spiritual, and paradoxically, reasserted power and strength back into their lives. One participant, Ralph, explained: “It’s one of the biggest misnomers that powerlessness means you can’t be empowered”. Another participant, Eryn, said: “Within powerlessness you find power”. It is evident that both Eryn and Ralph are drawing from Step One of AA’s Twelve Traditions: ‘Only through utter defeat are we able to take our first steps toward liberation and strength. Our admissions of personal powerlessness finally turn out to be bedrock upon which happy and purposeful lives may be built’ (AA, 2017b, 1).

While critiques of contemporary spirituality reject agency, I argue that it functions in this case to empower, therefore resisting the disempowerment experienced in addiction. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu conceives of an ability, at least partially, to respond to personal and structural constraints. In his words:

‘I do not see how relations of domination could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. *The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force*, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 80, emphasis in original).

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<sup>55</sup> The term ‘recovery capital’ denotes the growth of forms of ‘capital’ or resources including ‘human’, ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ (Cloud & Granfield, 2008). Cloud and Granfield develop the idea of ‘recovery capital’ (2008) from the work of Bourdieu. See *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1980) for a further dissemination of these notions of capital that extend beyond the purely financial.

My participants within the VRM do understand themselves as empowered<sup>56</sup> and to an extent, in control of their lives. Paradoxically, this exertion of power and strength emerged from the very acknowledgement of that disempowerment in addiction.

One participant, Willow, explained: “I’m more self-aware, I feel like I’ve got more options, I can achieve things, and that is empowering”. Another participant, Carmen, said: “It helps me live in the present, amongst this chaos. That was when I started to feel empowered”. David Best and Alexandre Laudet (2010) argue that recovery focuses on principles such as ‘hope, choice, freedom and aspiration that are experienced rather than diagnosed’ (2). Evidently, participants do experience themselves as exercising a degree of control and freedom over their lives and recovery<sup>57</sup>. This sense of agency functionally helps to sustain recovery.

Participants within the VRM are personally empowered in their recovery. A critical rejoinder may however claim that this is just neoliberal egotism seeping into wellbeing discourses. Many within the VRM comprehend addiction as a ‘dis-ease’ and ‘dislocation’ (Alexander, 2008). Bob Colonna in *The Addiction Process: A Systemic Cultural Condition* (2000) highlights that the ‘dis-ease’ of addiction is not only a disempowering attachment to problematic behaviour and substance use, but also constructed of a ‘cultural dis-ease: *fear, guilt and shame*’ (6)<sup>58</sup>. Additionally, many view addiction as a spiritual dis-ease. One participant, Joaquin, explained: “for me to straighten out mentally and physically I needed to address the problem underneath...that *dis-ease* I have in my own skin”. Another participant, Eryn, said: “The problem was me. I thought drugs was my problem. This *dis-ease* with myself; I am self-

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<sup>56</sup> Kenneth McLaughlin in *Empowerment: A Critique* (2016) offers a valid critical evaluation of this term. In particular, I agree that ‘There is a need to be aware of the ideological assumptions...surrounding the discourse of empowerment...that can be used for either progressive or regressive social policies’ (6).

<sup>57</sup> At least to the extent, as Judith Butler rightly argues, ‘that there is a sphere of freedom in which I can operate’ (2017).

<sup>58</sup> This language should not be confused with the understanding of addiction as a brain disease (see Volkow & Fowler, 2000).

centred to the core”<sup>59</sup>. The functionality of framing addiction as a spiritual dis-ease exceeds a purely materialist view of physical body and substance taking. Instead, it captures the emotional, almost transcendent quality of recovery and spirituality that participants described.

In *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (2008), Bruce Alexander argues that ‘social dislocation’ provokes addiction disorders. He argues: ‘dislocated people struggle valiantly to establish or restore psychosocial integration...to somehow ‘get a life’, ‘figure out who they are’, or to ‘build community’” (62). For participants, spirituality was embedded within a language that considered self-care an essential and powerful aspect of recovery, resisting against the dis-ease of addiction. This was also the starting point for many participants in their recovery. One participant, Eryn, explained:

“For me, I feel like I have arrived home. I’ve found what I’ve been looking for all my life, you know, that void I carried with me for many years, that I tried to fill with drugs. And now, it’s what’s inside, you know? I value myself as a person. I value my recovery. My values, my beliefs are different now.”

Alongside critiques of contemporary spirituality that dismiss individual agency, critics of recovery, many who are insiders themselves, follow a similar trajectory. One online group called *recovery in the bin* claim: ‘autonomy and self-determination can only be attained through collective struggle rather than through individualistic striving’ (2017). This view undermines the significance and functionality of spirituality and personal self-care for my participants. Cultural and feminist theorist, Sara Ahmed, astutely argues that: ‘neoliberalism sweeps up too much when all forms of self-care become symptoms of neoliberalism’ (2014)<sup>60</sup>. Dismissing

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<sup>59</sup> The Alcoholics Anonymous primary text, the *Big Book* (1998) cites being “self-centred”, “ego-centric” (61-62), ‘angry, indignant and self-pitying’ (61), and even ‘mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest’ (61) as traits spurred on by the spiritual dis-ease.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed’s blogpost *Self-care as Warfare* (2014) draws inspiration particularly from Audre Lorde’s infamous quote: ‘Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare’ (Lorde, 1988, 132).

self-care for theoretical reasons risks misunderstanding its functionality and its unforeseen consequences in the real world, in which social justice is threatened or even undermined, and individuals and groups suffer from unbearable trauma. Within the VRM, individual self-care is also embodied among a collective care for community. Ross Haenfler's notion of 'lifestyle movements' (2012), aptly describes the intersection between an individuals' involvement within a social movement. He highlights how individual actions occur alongside an 'understanding that others are taking similar action, collectively adding up to social change' (5). While I do not suggest that this model totally encompasses the VRM, it identifies a scholarly voice that does not wholly reject a notion of political subjectivity. Spirituality for participants, is about getting through day-to-day struggles and trauma, not necessarily perpetuating capitalism.

Participants' understanding of themselves as having autonomy<sup>61</sup> is important. Drawing on a Foucauldian notion of 'care of the self', Russell Anderson (2014) argues that in 12-Step spirituality, autonomy is the 'capacity to live according to our own determinations of the good life [and is] a matter of treating your life as something to be carefully crafted, to be produced' (141-143). One participant, Ralph, explained:

"It's to do with how I choose to live my life and how I treat other people, how other people treat me and kind of like, I just try to not behave in the old way that I used to. Part of that really means that I need to have a spiritual basis, and for me that means trying to do things through love, rather than through other means."

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<sup>61</sup> I use this term with caution. Pierre Bourdieu argues that: 'The "return of individualism", a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy which tends to destroy the philosophical foundations of the welfare state and in particular the notion of collective responsibility...The return to the individual is also what makes it possible to 'blame the victim', who is entirely responsible for his or her own misfortune...all of this being justified by the endlessly repeated need to reduce costs for companies' (Bourdieu, 1998, 7).

Substance use disorders are disempowering. They comprise of what participants view as a spiritual dis-ease of self. These concepts illustrate that the spirituality within the VRM is a far cry from the superficiality of those mentioned in earlier critiques. Whether participants do or do not identify with 12-Step, they engage in a dramatically life-changing transformation. Spirituality, embodied in that language of self-care, contributes to my participants being able to understand themselves as strong, autonomous, empowered and in control of their own lives.

### **The Language of Spirituality**

Although the language of spirituality was not adopted by all of my participants within the VRM, many do associate with 12-Step fellowships<sup>62</sup>, and therefore it is an appropriate lens in which to examine the movement. Robert Fuller in *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (2001) claims that ‘Alcoholics Anonymous is largely responsible for the widespread popularity of the phrase “spiritual, but not religious”’ (112). During interviews and survey-questionnaires, I asked the following questions: ‘Is spirituality a part of your recovery? If so; what does spirituality mean to you?’

One participant, Joaquin, said: “Spirituality has been the whole of my recovery”. Another participant, Eryn, remarked: “It is a massive part of my recovery, it’s something I do on a daily basis. Spirituality, gets me through that day”. The grassroots spirituality of the VRM is neither authoritative, nor is it a fixed meta-narrative of adherence. It is diverse and emerges contextually and experientially. While it is largely subjective, it is also embedded within communities such as the VRM, whose members identify with comparable experiences. For participants, it is a source of autonomy, meaning making and power, embodied in concepts

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<sup>62</sup>AA and NA are understood as spiritual; whereby an individual gives up their control to a ‘higher power’, which although is often called God, is interpreted by the individual (Dossett, 2013, 374). Although participants speak of giving up power, they again talked of how paradoxically, this gave them more power.

such as self-identity, narrative, and responsibility that act as life-changing catalysts of internal and external transformation.

Participants conceived their spirituality as: “connectedness”, “GOD (Group of Drunks)”, “Mother Theresa”, “Elvis”, “Big Book of AA”, “Love”, “Narcotics Anonymous”, “Nature”, “inner strength”, “atheist-humanism”, “something greater than the little me”, “a faith in the One True God”, “mindfulness and breathing”, “born again Christian after 15 years on heroin”, “something bigger than me”, “caring about others; love; gratitude; nurturing my spirit”, “a place of peace and serenity”, “ability not to judge”, “to give and receive unconditional love”, “spiritual principles of the 12 steps”, “becoming more honest, loving, pure, grateful, humility”, “It has been and it is the discovery and development of a relationship with a power greater than myself”, “The elevation of my spirit that comes from appreciation of the noblest works of man [sic] and the grandeur of the universe”, “Living a peaceful life, treating others, the way I would like to be treated. Giving of myself without expectations”, “a Father who had passed away”.

The secularisation thesis (Bruce, 2002) posits that allegedly, organised religion is in decline or is at least being persistently marginalised to the private sphere. However, the emergence of the ‘latemodern, postmodern or post-secular language of spirituality’ (Dossett, 2013, 374) has cast doubt on theories of religious decline. Heelas and Woodhead argue that the language of spirituality reflects a ‘subjective turn’ (2005, 10) inward<sup>63</sup>. As they argue, spirituality signals ‘the growth of a less regulated situation in which the sacred is experienced in intimate relationship with subjective-lives’ (10). As illustrated by participants, spirituality is varied and deeply meaningful. One participant, Ceri, explained: “It’s to do with my inner growth. When I came into recovery I had nothing, absolutely nothing, I was spent. Gradually over the years, I have built up an inner strength which you can call spirituality”. My participants

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* (2008) is well known for its discussion of individualism or ‘Sheilaism’ (2008).

privilege what Heelas and Woodhead call ‘inner sources of significance and authority’ (2005, 6), as established in the examples above. Contemporary spirituality, especially for Ceri, functioned as a mechanism for self-understanding and personal strength that supported her throughout the emotional and physical demands of recovery.

While the origins of 12-Step spirituality lie in the Evangelical Protestantism of the Oxford Group (Kurtz, 1991, 47-51), the influence of what Kurtz and White call ‘Modernizing Secularizers’ (2015, 63), manifests in the variety of spiritual language within the VRM. Many of my participants inherited the language of spirituality from 12-Step programs. Several informants, however, rejected the term spirituality on the basis of its Protestant Christian<sup>64</sup> roots, claiming to take a secular view, while others reclaimed spirituality as distinct from fellowship heritage<sup>65</sup>. In this project, I did survey more people associated with 12-Step fellowships. Only two out of eight interviewees did not identify with a 12-Step fellowship and the language of ‘spiritual experience’ (AA, 1998, 569-570) as understood in that context.

The diversity and open-mindedness of the grassroots spirituality of the VRM was illustrated during a memorial Church service that I attended on the eve of the National Recovery Walk in Halton, Cheshire. The Minister taking the service announced that this particular church was spiritual, and did not take a “static” view on Jesus Christ, God, faith, or spirituality<sup>66</sup>. Most songs sung, however, were explicitly ‘religious’<sup>67</sup> and verses spoken during the service came from both the Old Testament and New Testament<sup>68</sup>. Speaking to participants after the service, however, indicated that although several could not identify with that language of the Judaeo-Christian God of the biblical texts, they did accept its place for many in recovery, undoubtedly, as a result of that diversity of spirituality.

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<sup>64</sup> For a critique of Christian theologies of addiction as sin, see Mercadante (1996).

<sup>65</sup> Kurtz and White call those who endeavour for an understanding of Alcoholics Anonymous as based on its Oxford Group roots “Big Book Fundamentalists” (2015, 63).

<sup>66</sup> I wondered whether this may have been a nod to the diversity of spiritual language within the fellowships.

<sup>67</sup> One example was *10, 000 Reasons* by Mat Redman.

<sup>68</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and Luke 13.10-17.



The language of spirituality within the VRM is varied to the extent that it appears rather diffuse. I argue, however, that there are at least several ways in which to account for the persistence of spirituality within the movement. First is the ‘Recovery Spirituality’ (Kurtz & White, 2015) that is closely associated with 12-Step fellowships such as Alcoholics Anonymous. As Kurtz and White note, ‘A true “Recovery Spirituality” will embrace both the quasi-religious spirituality of the “Big Book Fundamentalists” and a more secular spirituality’ (2015, 63). The inclusivity of 12-Step spirituality toward ‘non-natural and naturalistic worldviews’ (Cantu, 2014, 68), and values such as ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘humility’ (McAleer, 2014, 87), feed into the wider grassroots spirituality of the VRM. Kurtz and White’s *emic* typology sets out 12-Step ‘recovery spirituality’ (2015, 68-69) principles as including:

- ‘*Release*’: ‘A profound sense of being freed...the removal of that obsession-compulsion’ (68).
- ‘*Gratitude*’: ‘The experience of thankfulness, the recognition that one has been gift-ed’ (68).
- ‘*Humility*’: ‘The recognition and acceptance that one is neither all nor nothing’ (68).
- ‘*Tolerance*’: ‘Experiencing the realities laid bare by humility’ (69).
- ‘*Forgiveness*’: ‘Being forgiven is a genuinely spiritual experience’ (69).
- ‘*Being-at-home*’: ‘Everyone needs a sense of “community”—the deep experience of being in some way at one with some others’ (69).

For participants who associate with 12-Step, these values are deeply empowering and embedded through their involvement and socialisation into fellowship programs. They contrast significantly with the superficiality and egotism of spirituality as laid out in chapter one, clearly illustrating the narrow caricature that this literature perpetuates. The first principle, ‘Release’ (2015, 68), for instance, highlights personal autonomy as spiritual, the functionality of which, resists against the disempowerment of addiction. Sociologists Molly Moloney and Sarah Fenstermaker, note that influenced by post-structuralism, many feminist and gender theorists understand autonomy as ‘a deep-seated logic of resistance and agency, through situated

creation, reaffirmation, and transformation’ (2002, 1999). Participants’ understanding of themselves as in control, or having agency, is not superficial, but acts as powerful resource in the moderation or cessation of a substance use disorder. Furthermore, it gives participants a sense of choice<sup>69</sup>, and what Matthew Guest calls ‘spiritual capital’ (2010, 197) that contributes to ‘a process of development and change’ (197). In this instance, that process of change is contextualised alongside personal and structural disempowerment. It is clear therefore, how necessary, powerful and resistant that language of spirituality is for participants.

However, many within the VRM distinguish themselves from 12-Step instead citing alternatives including self-help and mindfulness as well as more overtly faith-based strategies<sup>70</sup>. In part, the influence of 12-Step fellowship spirituality seems partly responsible for the proliferation of non-12-Step spirituality within the VRM. On the other hand, widespread cultural engagement with the “‘bricolage” or “eclecticism”” (Aupers and Houtman, 2006, 203) of the spiritual but not religious paradigm, has significantly impacted upon what Rudolf Moos calls the ‘Recovery Milieu’ (2008, 408).

Nonetheless, the grassroots spirituality of the VRM, whether associated with 12-Step or not, empowers participants. Cornell West’s notion of ‘combative spirituality’ (1999, 105-106) shares similarities. West argues that: ‘Combative spirituality sustains persons in their humanity...by looking death and dread and despair and disappointment and disease in the face and saying that there is in fact a hope beyond these’ (1999, 105-106). For participants within the VRM, grassroots spirituality encourages positive health and wellbeing, and a powerful sense of autonomy. It does not, therefore, fit into critiques of the SBNR. The difference here is about context, and about the internality and externality of change. It is not just about how

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<sup>69</sup> As previously pointed out, I sustain my view that this choice is limited.

<sup>70</sup> See Morjaria-Keval & Keval (2015) for a discussion on Sikh recovery.

people feel. It is that they can go from self-medicating with alcohol and other substances to not doing these things.

### **Spirituality, responsibility, narrative and identity**

Responsibility, narrative, and intra-personal identity change were all significant aspects of my participants' experiences of being a person in long or short-term recovery. These themes are therefore embedded in their belief and practice centred on spirituality and meaning making. I selected these concepts for my research, as I wanted to probe this relationship, focusing particularly on stories and sense of self-identity.

All informants who completed an interview or survey questionnaire answered 'yes' to the question: "Are you a more responsible person in recovery?" One informant, Willow, explained: "I am definitely more responsible. I take my job seriously, I go to work 9-5, and people trust me and give me responsibilities. My brothers and sisters would be happy to trust me with their kids. My Mum and Dad trust me not to mess things up". Another participant, Ralph, said:

"I think one of my main difficulties was being responsible and very irresponsible in active addiction. I'm no means perfect, I'm still learning, still making mistakes, I mean you know, sometimes, you don't look at your own evidence. If I look back over my life in active addiction, if I look at my life now, you know, things that I do have, I sort of earned and have come as a result of me taking responsibility for myself and my life and now for other people. I wouldn't have been able to do these things in my active years, but now I think because of the way that I choose to live my life, you know, it, the two come hand in hand."

Both Willow and Ralph similarly experienced responsibility<sup>71</sup>. They both felt able to act in ways that they had been unable to during their addiction. They also framed responsibility in the terms of autonomy and feeling in control. They did not necessarily aim for selfish or narcissistic goals, but focused on maintaining the necessities of everyday life such as family, bills, jobs, housing and looking after others including children.

Other participants included in their conceptions of responsibility: “Pay the bills and care for my 4-year-old son”, “More considerate”, “Fully self-supporting. Function to societal norms. I care for 2 children. I have steady employment. Took responsibility for me, children and my future. Work within a mental health crisis team. Am able to reach out to people”, “family and health”, “Active community member”, “Every aspect of my life has changed for the better”, “I have choices back in my life, provided I maintain my recovery”.

While participants talk about autonomy and responsibility, I am drawn instead to theorizing the functionality of agency as opposed to its substantive merits or limitations. Freedoms are limited by what Pierre Bourdieu terms ‘field’ and ‘habitus’. He writes: ‘A field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power...habitus consists of a set of historical relations “deposited” within individual bodies’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 16). It is evident that humans are exposed to internal and external structures of power from the human psychology of the brain, to alcohol and gambling advertising and illicit narcotic markets. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s theory of habitus does articulate, I argue, a sense of agency undermined by deterministic interpreters. As Lois McNay argues, ‘habitus gives practice a relative autonomy’ (1999, 100). While this is limited, there is a sense of being able to act in the world. This is important for participants and demonstrates how agency can function in contexts that do not necessarily perpetuate neoliberalism.

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<sup>71</sup> The concept of the responsibility that Joaquin identified was embedded within the 12-Steps, particularly Step eight and nine. In the *emic* text, *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* (2013), Joe. C notes: ‘Responsibility is not an ego-feeding proposition, but rather a sign of maturity...a guiding force’ (54).

These concepts have functionality. Spirituality, for participants, included constructing their own sense of meaning. It is also evident that asserting themselves as responsible supported a sense of that. At the same time, it contrasted with their lives during addiction. On the other hand, it accounts for the development of a narrative of recovery; a concept embedded within my participants' conceptualisation of spirituality. Mary Jean Walker (2014) offers a useful analysis of the contradictions between responsibility and powerlessness, concepts which appear inconsistent<sup>72</sup> together. This approach also avoids polarising agency and structure. She argues that narratives can facilitate an understanding of how 'it is possible to "take" responsibility by appropriating certain actions as one's own, irrespective of whether or not they were freely undertaken' (35). Narratives of recovery avoid a polarising debate around agency and structure, focusing instead on their functionality. Using Ricoeur's notion of 'emplotment', Walker asserts that narratives are constructed around meaning, and 'in interpreting ourselves and our lives narratively, we connect diverse events together as a unity, making sense of ourselves as wholes' (36). For those participants that accept a 12-Step view of powerlessness alongside responsibility, it functions to embody a sense of meaning making embedded within a self-narrative that supports an understanding of their individual recovery story.

As many visible recovery advocates associate with 12-Step fellowships, sharing one's own story retained a sense of meaning for them within the VRM. One participant, Ralph, who is in long-term recovery from alcohol and other substances, explained:

"I find out more about my experience the more I review it, like when I tell other people my story and they tell me theirs back through kind of like that sharing process, I learn more about my own experience, through kind of like how they've perceived mine, or like attached their experience to what I've just said. So, it means I'm always learning. The more I share my story the more perspective I get and the deeper my understanding."

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<sup>72</sup> Borrowing from Melissa Wilcox, who cites Boellstorff's notion of identities as 'ungrammatical', she notes how 'established social categories...fail to match one's sense of self' (2009, 178).

During a number of 12-Step fellowship meetings I attended, including an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at the National Recovery Walk in Halton, I witnessed participants share intimate stories of their experiences of substance use disorders. As Ralph illustrated, the growth of his recovery story is based experientially and supports an ability to better understand himself<sup>73</sup> in recovery as well as addiction. As Walker argues: narrative provides ‘self-understanding to members, so that throughout their recovery they may reinterpret themselves and their lives’ (2014, 35). Furthermore, narratives of recovery take a particular structure. As psychologists Stephanie Brown and Virginia Lewis argue, this narrative is centred, especially in 12-Step programs, on “‘what it was like’ (during drinking), ‘what happened’ (to move the person to recovery), and ‘what it is like now’” (1999, 145)<sup>74</sup>. This allows for a degree of reflexivity and avoids breaking with an understanding of oneself during addiction, which functions as largely empowering in recovery.

Narratives of recovery for participants are constructed around spirituality and meaning making. Interestingly, they also intersect with a rolling sense of self-identification. As Melissa Wilcox points out ‘the self is constantly under construction’ (2009, 176). While some participants had a very fixed view of their spirituality, others often renegotiated this in a very fluid way. One participant, Joaquin, said:

“I rely on something bigger than me. And it can be anything. Over the years it has been my dead Father, it has been GOD (Group of Drunks), Mother Teresa; it has been Elvis; because I need to put a face to these things. What I found was that when I went to church one Sunday, the biblical texts just don’t seem to apply.”

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<sup>73</sup> Of course, this is not to suggest that neither narrative nor identity develop in a vacuum. Indeed, in the next chapter, I argue that vital to recovery is the view that these processes are social. Other people have a very significant impact upon the development and growth of both concepts.

<sup>74</sup> Criminologist Shadd Maruna’s study of ex-offenders desistance from criminal activity in Liverpool (2001) similarly noted the need to ‘develop a coherent, prosocial identity’ (7) and a ‘coherent and credible self-story to explain how their checkered pasts could have led to their new, reformed identities’ (7).

Joaquin's sense of spirituality was tied to a self-understanding of what worked positively for him throughout the 'recovery process' (Best, 2012, 63). Narrative embodies the meaning making that is so implicit in the grassroots spirituality of the VRM. For Addiction Councillor, Jonathan Diamond, spirituality comprises the discovery of 'acceptance, love and compassion' (2000, 87), ideas which many of my participants identified with. Moreover, he notes the creation of a 'sense of interior space...Spirituality...strengthens our connections with ourselves, others, and the world around us. It allows us to inhabit parts of ourselves we had long since abandoned' (2000, 87)<sup>75</sup>. Although Diamond's perspective is largely *emic*, he illustrates that sense of personal meaning making, strength and empowerment that participants within the VRM identified with. These values contrast with the narrow views of contemporary spirituality discussed earlier in chapter one. They evidently show that it is about a powerful and demanding transformation that takes place in which my participants feel involved in.

To examine the concept of intra-personal identity, during qualitative semi-structured interviews I asked my participants 'Do you think you are a different person in recovery?' One participant, Carmen, observed:

"I'm much more tolerant and humble, and compassionate. I feel that something has opened up inside me. Your own strength, the feeling that you could recover, all this is important and all this I have learnt. I feel much more compassionate and tolerant [laughter]; those are the changes that have taken place. I'm stronger, tougher, and more able to be myself than I was before. So [spirituality] it's not a religious thing. But it is about feeling alive [laughter] and being connected with something. I think the whole thing was like, 'so who do you think you are?' and 'where is that you?', and 'is this you inside?'"

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<sup>75</sup> In the next chapter of this dissertation, I extend this argument and claim that the language of spirituality, and narratives, are embodied by the VRM. Visible Recovery advocates contribute and participate in storying a public narrative by engaging socially and politically around issues of addiction and recovery.

Carmen noted a significant change in how she understands herself in recovery as contrasted with how she felt during what she called her “illness”. She was able to be the person that she felt that she really was. It is evident that Carmen felt that her self-identification in recovery was in some ways more authentic than it had been previously. She endeavoured to find what Wilcox calls: ‘True selves’ (2009, 188); the ‘sought self as a pre-existing truth – a treasure to be found’ (188). Furthermore, Carmen’s sense of spirituality, namely feeling powerful, “compassionate”, “alive” and “connected”, was embodied in her existential quest to find truth and meaning about who she was and how that could support her in recovery.

Intra-personal self-identity did not always include rejecting what David Best and colleagues call ‘identities that have previously been enacted’ (2015, 4). One participant, Ralph, explained:

“I felt I had to try and become a completely different person, because you want to distance yourself from that thing that had become like a monkey on your back. But sort of as time goes on, you become forgiving of yourself. You allow yourself to like some of the things you thought you *had* to change. You find a way of allowing yourself to be in particular ways that you thought ‘I’ve got to change’.”

Not rejecting previous substance use behaviours and associated identities (Best *et al*, 2015, 4) demonstrates the complexity in negotiating intra-personal identity transition alongside the construction of meaning. For participants associated with 12-Step programs, spirituality was instrumental in that change. As Dossett notes: a ‘spiritual awakening must occur for the person who was in the past unable to stop the addictive using or behaviour, to become someone (sufficiently different) who no longer requires the substance’ (2013, 375). Participants engaged in a very raw process of self-understanding from which recovery was able to begin to emerge.

Even for participants who did not associate with 12-Step, the examination of one’s self-identity was built around that language of spirituality. Unlike the superficiality of spiritualities



discussed in chapter one, for participants in this study, it functioned very differently. To sustain the cessation of substance use disorders, these identities relied what Best and colleagues term 'personal capital' (2016), comprised of 'resilience or physical wellbeing' (242). These evidently demonstrate positive empowerment and autonomous creative agency. As Trysh Travis (2009) notes, it is 'an opportunity for self-formation within a fragmented postmodern world devoid of culture-wide systems of meaning' (9). Participants actively shaped their sense of personal meaning making, which they identified as spirituality, around their recovery. They implant this diverse language within their sense of self-identity, narratives of recovery, and when taking responsibility. The functionality of these was to bring about an end to a substance use disorder and sustain their transition in recovery. Alongside this, participants developed a tangible belief that they could positively act in the world; understand who they are; and that they had a very personal story to share with others.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that for participants within the VRM, the language and functionality of contemporary spirituality is not susceptible to the critiques set out in chapter one. Alongside personal empowerment, participants developed a particular rhetoric in which to sustain their recovery as well as interpret and negotiate the complexities of the world around them. As Aupers and Houtman (2006) suggest, this includes 'acquiring a new cognitive frame of interpretation; undergoing new experiences; legitimating one's newly acquired worldview' (208). While the critical literature dismisses individual subjectivity, I have argued in this chapter that its functional capacity is positive, powerful and resistant. Of course, halting addiction is not an easy task for participants and this does not happen in a vacuum. The VRM is however made up of social actors who work together while embodying individual agency. Writing in *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (2009), Wilcox argues that

‘individualism is both consciously and unconsciously rooted in the community’ (9). In chapter four, I examine how spirituality manifests socially within the VRM among others with a comparable experience as well as family and wider-society. I argue that while the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is tied to the individualism of the SBNR paradigm, it is nonetheless embedded among communities that celebrate and advocate for recovery.

## Chapter 4

### **“It doesn’t have to be all self, self, self”: Recovery, Spirituality and Community**

Critiques of contemporary spirituality argue that it is hyperindividualistic, selfish and egotistical. They also contend that it perpetuates capitalist and neoliberal ideology through political passivity (Carrette & King, 2005; Webster, 2012; Martin, 2015). In this chapter, I argue that while the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is tied to the individualism of the SBNR, it is just as much embedded in community and among the social. As Wilcox (2009) argues, communities ‘are still very much present in the “subjective turn” but are often elided by commentators’ sometimes anxious focus on “individualism”’ (162). Personal spirituality as a basis for agency, hope and strength in despairing circumstances, in this case, intersects with inter-personal relationships with family, friends, local recovery communities and wider-society. Many VRM advocates are, for instance, involved in unpaid and altruistic voluntary and service work.

Agency and spirituality are vital catalysts for participants’ empowerment to involve themselves in communal activities, and engage within a movement based on the endeavour for social change. Drawing on participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, I challenge the literature that narrowly caricatures spirituality as hyperindividualistic. I demonstrate that the VRM reflects the values of what David Best describes as ‘prefigurative politics’ (2016)<sup>76</sup>. VRM advocates lobby for better service access, treatment plurality, social integration, community networks and human rights (Best, 2012). The mobilisation of the VRM at events such as the Recovery Walks, is at least to an extent political. Activists collectively challenge

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<sup>76</sup> Sociologist Wini Breines describes this as an ‘attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics’ (1989, 6). It is often discussed in the context of the Occupy movement for instance. See Graeber (2013).

addiction and substance-related stigma. They creatively and performatively imagine an inclusive future for those in recovery, based on grassroots-level social justice.

### **Beyond the Self: Spirituality and Social Identity**

In chapter three, I argued that for participants identifying with the language of spirituality and in recovery from a substance use disorder, that it is embedded within positive self-care, responsibility, narrative, and intra-personal identity. Without these, participants claimed that they would struggle to build the necessary ‘recovery capital’ (Cloud & Granfield, 2008) to engage within other people. In this section, I contend that the grassroots spirituality of the VRM encourages involvement in community. For many, this is coupled with the principles of 12-Step ‘recovery spirituality’ (Kurtz & White, 2015, 68) such as ‘gratitude,’ ‘humility,’ ‘tolerance,’ and ‘forgiveness’ (68). For others, especially those who do not associate with 12-Step, their very conceptualisation of spirituality embodies and is tied to community.

The grassroots spirituality of the VRM is built on connection, mutuality and comradeship. During my qualitative fieldwork within the VRM and 12-Step fellowships such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, I observed, as David Best notes, that recovery is ‘social in nature...involving other people and taking place in social settings’ (Best, 2012, 12)<sup>77</sup>. As one participant, Bryn, in early abstinence-based recovery, remarked: “It’s realizing that working off pride and ego just hold you back. I find that, it doesn’t have to be all *self, self, self*”. Similarly, the language of spirituality was also discussed in the terms of other people. One participant, Carmen, conceived of her spirituality as “feeling alive and being connected”. Another participant, Ralph, who was in long-term recovery, conceptualised spirituality as

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<sup>77</sup> My first experience of the VRM took place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2016, at the Cheshire Recovery Federation’s Recovery Walk in Chester. This event clearly demonstrated the importance of community and public celebration for advocates. From the Recovery Walk itself through the winding streets of Chester, to the celebrations and stalls set up in Grosvenor Park, there was a powerful sense of solidarity and support.

“love”, speaking of his encouragement to consider “how I treat other people, how other people treat me”.

Many participants spoke of, and demonstrated through their day-to-day lives, the power of inter-personal relationships and community. Ernie Kurtz and William White consider ‘being-at-home’ (2015, 69) a vital aspect of 12-Step ‘recovery spirituality’ (2015, 63). They argue that community is ‘the deep experience of being in some way *at one* with some others. Unlike other communities that one may join, “home” is a place where we *belong* because it is where our very weaknesses and flaws *fit in*’ (2015, 69, original emphasis). Speaking of her involvement in both Narcotics Anonymous and the VRM, one participant, Eryn, said: “For me, I feel like I have arrived home. I’ve found what I’ve been looking for all of my life”<sup>78</sup>. For Eryn, both communities offered her a powerful sense of belonging which supported her abstinence from substances. She also identified her spirituality as the “program of Narcotics Anonymous”. This functioned to both sustain her recovery and embody relationships with others who she could help and who could also help her.

Many participants within the VRM tied their understanding of spirituality to belonging. As one participant, Joaquin, remarked: “They sometimes say that ‘alcohol-ism’ is the I. S. M. that comes in people, ‘I Separate Myself’. My empowerment in recovery has been the strength of other people. The hope that I get from them”. Joaquin did identify with the 12-Steps and structured his response around what Kurtz and White (2015) call an ‘escape from the bondage of self’ (66). Joaquin constructed meaning around other people which helped mediate his involvement in supportive communities and collective empowerment. This contrasted with his view that in addiction he had separated himself from others and therefore become isolated from social experiences.

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<sup>78</sup> I am not suggesting that all of those people who identify with recovery would resonate with it as social. Indeed, there are documented cases of ‘Natural Recovery’, ‘Spontaneous Remission’ and ‘Maturing Out’ (White, 2014, 443).

Even those who did not identify with 12-Step spirituality belonged to communities including the VRM. As Trysh Travis notes, ‘post-12-Step recovery points its adherents toward a larger social and political world beyond the self, and offers them a spiritual language with which to address the world’ (2009, 16). Participants described spirituality as: “having a connection with people”, “caring about others and nurturing through love”, “treating others the way I would like to be treated”. While the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is diverse, it is evidently embedded, expressed, and celebrated through that language of community and togetherness. Furthermore, it strategically functions to construct meaning and empowerment. As Gordon Lynch notes, this emphasises ‘the symbolic distinctiveness of the sacred with an experience of encountering a power greater than the individual self’ (2012, 24). The sacred in this case is participants’ spirituality and was tied to social exchanges with others that were functionally empowering to the extent that they supported recovery transformations.

Belonging to networks that support positive health and wellbeing has been demonstrated to improve the chances of a sustained recovery (Best, 2012, 72). This is called the “Social Identity Model of Recovery” (SIMOR) (Best *et al*, 2015; Buckingham *et al*, 2013). Sarah Buckingham and colleagues’ study of the SIMOR suggests that ‘being a member of a recovery group can aid in the successful reduction and cessation of addictive practices’ (2013, 8). One participant, Bryn, clarified:

“It’s about having good support around you. You’ve got two types of friends. Friends that are like ‘come on, a pint won’t hurt you’, and friends who are like ‘we’re not even going to take you to the pub’. It’s about picking the right people. I found since, since getting sober that I, I’m more selective of my social network. Other people influence me, and if I think someone’s going to take me down a negative path in life I’ll put them to the side, whereas before I might not have.”

David Best and colleagues in an article entitled *What the Recovery Movement Tells Us about Prefigurative Politics*, (2016) discuss the significance of local recovery communities<sup>79</sup>. They use the Serenity Café in Edinburgh as an example. They note that a frustration with a lack of nightlife, ‘tied in with a sense of social exclusion from “normal” nightlife’ (Best *et al*, 2016, 244), resulted in the emergence of the Serenity Café, which obtained opportunities for appropriate nightlife (Best *et al*, 2016, 244). Alongside dealing with specific contextual matters, Best and colleagues argue that these communities actively facilitate a powerful sense of identity among people with similar experiences (2016, 244). Although not explicitly about spirituality, this example illustrates an existential search for meaning that is embedded communally.

The Fallen Angels Dance Theatre<sup>80</sup> performed during both the National UK Recovery Walk in Halton, and in Chester. Based in the North West, this community of both professional and amateur dancers, story and communicate recovery through performative and expressive choreographed routines. A conversation that emerged with a dancer indicated an embodied sense of spirituality articulated performatively alongside other dancers. Both examples of localised recovery communities illustrate the empowerment behind meaningful pursuits or as Lynch notes, ‘a horizon of meaning in which social actors engage...and that renders possible and meaningful particular kinds of emotional performance’ (2012, 42). For participants, spirituality and meaning is empowering. It endows, to an extent, an ability to act in the world, not alone, but within communities of likeminded people who affirm recovery advocacy and pursue deeply meaningful action and positive life changes.

Critiques of spirituality discussed in chapter one contend that the SBNR are narcissistic and hyperindividualistic (Carrette & King, 2005; Martin, 2015). So far, I have challenged this

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<sup>79</sup> During the Recovery Walks in Blackpool, Chester, and Halton, I witnessed diverse recovery communities from various localities unite as one social movement to celebrate recovery. Sporting purple t-shirts and colourful banners, these groups represent the local and contextual experiences of people attempting to transform their lives through recovery.

<sup>80</sup> See their website <http://www.fallenangelsdancetheatre.co.uk/>

narrow caricature by illustrating how the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is rooted in the social, just as much as it is personal. Participants, to an extent, exemplify Judith Butler's notion that 'The "I" is thus at once a "We," (2015, 52). Although participants within the VRM<sup>81</sup> expressed values such as community, spirituality and belonging, they also discussed the desire to help and support others. Political scientist, George Monbiot, calls this the 'politics of belonging' (2017). Humans, he argues, are naturally 'altruistic' and empathetic', but this has been undermined by neoliberalism and consumptive capitalism (2017). As I have argued so far, participants within the VRM, to a degree, subvert these concepts by engaging with others socially. Furthermore, they embody a politics of altruism in their commitment to working within and alongside communities.

### **Voluntary and Service Work within Recovery Communities**

During my qualitative ethnography, I encountered people within the VRM who, alongside belonging to diverse recovery communities, were also actively engaged in voluntary and service work. David Best and colleagues claim that the SIMOR encourages group participation and that 'the more members are immersed in the activities and roles of the recovery group, the more they benefit from their membership of that group' (Best *et al*, 2015, 8). Participants were involved in numerous voluntary activities and service roles. During my semi-structured interviews, I asked: "Do you do any voluntary work/service?" One participant, Ralph, explained:

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<sup>81</sup> Philosopher Paul Ricoeur's work highlights the significance of the *other* in the construction of oneself. Indeed, he argues that the 'selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other' (1992, 3). This helps to conceptualise agency as a relationship between the subject and social.



“It’s also that altruistic thing of just trying to be helpful, so I’ve just been on the phone now for 25 minutes to someone; I’m on phone service. Service has been a part of my recovery. And a lot of it is going to rehabs, and often you’re vilified for it by the people in there who are looking at you to say, ‘who the fuck’s this?’ And all I’m trying to do is share my experience”.

Voluntary activities and service work demonstrates a pro-social engagement of those belonging within the VRM. Moreover, many advocates do not participate in professional treatment, but instead belong to non-professionalised recovery communities influenced by 12-Step mutual-aid programs (Best *et al*, 2016, 240). As many participants within the VRM do associate with 12-Step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the desire to help other people in recovery is a significant theme. Public Health researchers Sarah Zemore and Maria Pagano note that in AA, helping includes ‘service, pro-social behaviours, other-orientated behaviours, unselfish caring for others, good will, and altruism’ (2008, 143)<sup>82</sup>.

For my participants associated with 12-Step fellowships, being involved in helping the group was something that many identified with, or at least planned to do. I conducted participant-observation at several 12-Step mutual aid fellowship meetings including AA, NA, and Al-Anon. From reading passages aloud, serving tea and coffee, to running the meeting, many participants supported their recovery groups<sup>83</sup>. One participant, Eryn, explained:

“It’s all voluntary. When people say to me you do so much, cos [*sic*] I am literally busy all the time and I love it, because, I’m touching addicts and showing them that if I can do it, then they can do it. And I don’t get paid for it, in money, but I do in my heart and in my spirit. My spirit is fed by the volunteer work I do, you know? A job that pays, a nice house and a nice car, social acceptability does not equal recovery. Recovery for me is what I feel in here, you know?”

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<sup>82</sup> The AA logo, a circle with a triangle inside, represents the three principles of service, unity and recovery.

<sup>83</sup> For some participants, this included being a sponsor to another person in early abstinence-based recovery just as they might have had. See Kurtz (1991).

Altruism is not necessarily linked to 12-Step spirituality, but is evidently embedded in participants' construction of meaning. Eryn identifies a sense of her spirituality, which in her case was 12-Step, working through her volunteering. Interestingly, she rejected remuneration and materialism as worthy goals, citing something expressive and transcendental. Eryn reflects Kurtz and White's (2015) notion of 'recovery spirituality' (66) as 'beyond and between' (66) and grounded in 'giving *by* getting, getting *by* giving' (65). Moreover, it is 'out from the narrow confines of the self-centred self...any spirituality—including any secular spirituality—*beyonds* its adherents' (65). This was exemplified in Eryn's commitment to community and her desire to assist others, not necessarily for selfish reasons, but to promulgate the message of recovery.

The grassroots spirituality of the VRM, inclusive of 12-Step and non-12-Step approaches, helped narrate and shape meaningful and mutual reciprocity, belonging and connection that contrasted with the lack thereof during addiction. Voluntary work and service for participants was also empowering and enriching, both personally and collectively. One participant, Willow, described:

"Whatever route you take, one of the themes throughout is always communities and groups, people coming together, whatever it is you're doing, I think a lot of the power comes from that, and strength. But obviously you need people to invest time, and that's why if I can I will, give up my time; it's important for me. I feel like it's useful, you know, if I can help, usually they've got no money and they need volunteers and stuff. If I can help, I will help. I try".

Alongside the pragmatic implications of assisting recovery communities with little or no funding, Willow's account highlighted helping and empowerment as significant. While individuals evidently 'help themselves by helping others' (Zemore & Pagano, 2008, 162), spirituality and meaning are in this case tied to action and active engagement. Abby Day's neo-Durkheimian notion of 'performative belief' (2011, 194) through 'lived, embodied

performance’ (194) emphasises spirituality as understood through a social narrative constructed of ‘actions and activities’ (194).

Many participants within the VRM committed their day-to-day working lives to helping those with substance use disorders. This was an opportunity to draw from their own subjective experiences while working a job and helping others to find recovery. One participant, Carmen, stated:

“I worked for while on the Wards at Rosewood, so I got a commission to work with people in recovery from mental-ill health. And I could see that there was a community here. And then I started to work with people in recovery from drugs and alcohol. So, I was now working in a community with these creative means, having us connect with ourselves, with others, and helping that reinforce community.”

Many within the VRM negotiate their own recovery alongside working as counsellors for instance. Their lived-experiences are unique and serve as a positive way of facilitating others’ recovery. Zemore and Pagano highlight that ‘peers can express a range of responses restricted among therapists by their professional position’ (2008, 149). Spirituality and meaning making, for participants, are embodied within the SIMOR (Best *et al*, 2015; Buckingham *et al*, 2013) and manifest in their empowering participation, voluntary work, and altruism evident among recovery communities. This inspires what Philosopher John Houston (2015) notes is a ‘mutual growth in virtue’ (174) that I further argue is evident in the generosity of participants within the VRM.

So far throughout this chapter, I have argued that the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is far removed from the superficial and narcissistic caricatures set out in chapter one. While I do not reject the subjectivity of spirituality, I argue that for participants, it is consolidated in their aspiration to belong and contribute to communities of recovery. As Wilcox claims, this

‘shift towards expressive individualism should not distract us into believing that communities and social contexts have become irrelevant’ (2009, 206). The vital roles that participants perform are not egotistical or insincere. Indeed, they are functional, as is their spirituality; providing hope, empowerment and encouragement to other people. This does not however stop with only those identifying as themselves in recovery.

### **Engaging with Family and Wider-Society**

During my ethnography within the VRM, a theme that emerged was that concern for others extended beyond any tribal boundaries of just those identifying with recovery. The value of (re)integrating with family and wider-society was emphasised by many of my participants as significant to their social narrative of recovery.

For many participants, relationships with family were fractured throughout active addiction. As Jim Orford argues, the family too are ‘disempowered’ (2013, 78) and ‘colonised by addiction’ (77). Several participants did attempt to involve family in their recovery, and in some cases, by trying to make amends for past wrongdoings<sup>84</sup>. This was rooted in the value of altruism as well as the reliability and responsibility that I highlighted in the previous chapter. One participant, Ceri, who had been in abstinence-based recovery for eleven years, said: “So, I suppose in a way, the role-modelling of recovery is important for my sons”. For Ceri, who identified her spirituality, in this case a 12-Step higher power of “atheist-humanism”<sup>85</sup>, shared with me the empowerment that it gives her to be able to say to her sons: “your Mother’s better now, your Mother’s able to do things now, I’m stronger, tougher, more able to be myself than

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<sup>84</sup> This is certainly not the case for all my participants involved in this study. Many of those who have been through active addiction and are in recovery are unable to reunite or reintegrate with family members. My two experiences hearing speakers at Al-Anon meetings indicated the difficulties, uncertainty and powerlessness that families face.

<sup>85</sup> This identification with atheist humanism is interesting in terms of classifying spirituality. Scholars such as Lois Lee might identify this more with ‘non-religion’ (2015). She describes this as ‘any phenomenon-position, perspective, or practice-that is primarily understood in relation to religion’ (32). Yet this term seems to work better substantively, whereas for participants, there is an empowerment in self-identifying with spirituality.

I was before, start enjoying life a bit more”. Spirituality functioned for Ceri as a basis for meaning. It allowed her to show her sons just how much she had accomplished in recovery. Ceri’s spirituality also echoes Kurtz and White’s ‘recovery spirituality’ (2015), particularly ‘Release’ as ‘A profound sense of being freed’ (68) and ‘Gratitude’ as ‘The experience of thankfulness’ (68). This is evident when Ceri refers to her autonomy as strength as well as telling her sons to “start enjoying life”.

Responsibility as a meaning making strategy, something that I discussed in chapter three, was also anchored in participants’ testimonies of their (re)integration with families and wider-society. Many expressed how they desired to be viewed as reliable by their family<sup>86</sup> and friends. In a very emotional account of his sister’s passing, one participant, Joaquin, spoke of his reintegration with family because of his recovery<sup>87</sup>. He explained:

“At Christmas, my family used to say would you bring the Crisps, you know, used to go and visit up in Lancaster, so it was a 100-mile trip for me. And I used to get very offended and resentful they’d always say bring the Crisps or the Peanuts for this buffet we were having. I wanted to do a Vegetarian Chilli. But the reality is when I didn’t turn up, it was easy enough for them to nip to the shop and get some crisps. My Sister died three and a half months into my recovery of Lung Cancer unfortunately, even though she never smoked it was particularly aggressive, with a 14-year-old, 18-year-old, and 21-year-old, and every year in my recovery I’ve gone the 200-mile round trip to cook them Sunday, Christmas dinner. But they know, I’m ultra-reliable. I always wanted to be ultra-reliable before, but I couldn’t keep commitments”.

Joaquin’s testimony speaks of an understanding of himself as reliable and responsible in recovery. He contrasted this with a view of himself as unreliable in addiction. Alongside this,

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<sup>86</sup> The involvement of the family within the VRM facilitated better-quality comprehension of addiction by their loved ones. They too take on the role of advocates. Educating family about substance use disorders and having them join in with the Recovery Walks challenged stigma. Their knowledge and support contributes to positive messages of hope that help and empower other families.

<sup>87</sup> It was very difficult to transcribe this account. Listening to the recording several times, I was confronted by the very raw, emotional and traumatic realities that participants and their families experience. This was also one of my most quoted testimonies in conference papers. It took me a while before I was able to speak the words aloud without sobbing.

Joaquin hints, at least to an extent, at making amends. As he identified with 12-Step spirituality, his testimony reflected a sense of Alcoholics Anonymous' 9<sup>th</sup> Step<sup>88</sup>. He also identified what he called the "strength of other people. The hope that I get from them" as belonging to his construction of spirituality. As clinical psychologist Michelle Pearce and colleagues note, 'restoring relationships could not be accomplished without a community which embodies...vulnerability, honesty, and dependence' (2008, 197). I would augment this idea by adding spirituality, which for participants, whether 12-Step or not, is substantially empowering and very much present in their life-changing stories of recovery.

Alongside families, those within VRM are also actively engaged with wider-society, including public services and the media. One participant, Eryn, said:

"For the first time in my life, I am a productive member of society. I never had that before. I had charge-sheets. I had psychiatric wards, detoxes, rehabs. Now, I have delivered addiction training to Greater Manchester Police. I've just voluntarily done a presentation which goes to the Councillors and the Police Crime Commissioners on New Psychoactive Substances, like *spice* and *mamba*. It's all voluntary. I have also just volunteered on a film project. When I was in addiction, I wrecked communities. The Police came to my house, I had a massive impact upon my community by doing what I was doing, and I thought 'I'm only harming me, I'm not harming anyone else'. Now I have an impact upon my community in a positive way".<sup>89</sup>

Eryn viewed her engagement with wider-society and community<sup>90</sup> as helping make a positive contribution. This contrasted with her view that in addiction, her social influence had been negative. As William White notes: 'recovery empowers healing and restorative force

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<sup>88</sup> The AA 9<sup>th</sup> Step reads: 'Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others' (AA, 1998, 59).

<sup>89</sup> Another participant, Ceri, visited Prisons. She explained: "I was able to get clearance and so I visited all of the Prisons in South Wales actually. Parc, Cardiff, Usk and Prescoed. I took a meeting every week in the bail hostel which was great".

<sup>90</sup> Before the National Recovery Walk in Halton began, both the Mayor and local GP spoke about the implications of addiction on their community. This also demonstrates the interest of the local community in recovery, and the potential positives that it can bring to society. Furthermore, the Mayor and council allowed the use of the Select Security Stadium for free. This illustrates a mobilisation of community resources in support of the recovery community.

within the life of family and community’ (2013, 9). For participants, spirituality mediates their engagement with community, not for narcissistic reasons, but to provide help, support and hope to other people. Drawing from Abby Day in *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (2011), my participants’ spirituality is both ‘relationship-centred and relationship-guided’ (204). This demonstrates that the view of contemporary spirituality as hyperindividualistic and selfish is a narrow caricature. While the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is diverse, and to an extent diffuse, it encompasses ideas and values around community interaction and altruism that are bound up in the existential search for meaning. Having experienced recovery for themselves, participants are keen to pass it on to others.

### **Visible Recovery Activism and Social Change**

In this concluding section, I argue that the grassroots spirituality of the VRM mediates involvement in social activism. I am not necessarily arguing that this is “political spirituality”, but instead, that participants identifying with that language are engaged in the endeavour to challenge stigma and creatively imagine an inclusive future for those in recovery and with a substance use disorder. While critiques of spirituality highlight that it is apolitical and hyperindividualistic, in this unique case study, I challenge that narrow distortion. My participants’ engagement within the VRM evidently challenges this view. I draw from David Best’s work on the VRM as embodying the ‘collective action’ of ‘prefigurative politics’ (2016, 238). I also cite my experiences conducting participant-observation within the VRM during events and activities such as the Recovery Walks.

Jim Orford argues that there needs to be a ‘public way to deal with addiction’ (2013, 147). The VRM engages both publicly and politically<sup>91</sup> around issues of addiction and recovery.

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<sup>91</sup> I am not suggesting that participants necessarily engage in parliamentary or ideological political discourse. During one occasion on a recovery Facebook page, one member vented her frustration and confusion at a post that cited Situational Marxism. This highlights that not all among the VRM are engaged in these conversations. Another participant during a Recovery Walk also challenged my view that the VRM addresses stigma.

VRM advocates are encouraged to reshape so-called, personal troubles, socially and culturally. Influenced by grassroots LGBT+ Pride Marches<sup>92</sup>, the VRM organizes public celebrations, including concerts, conferences, communal sleepovers, rallies, and recovery walks. Acting horizontally<sup>93</sup>, the movement reflects the principles of what White calls ‘Decentralised Leadership’ and ‘Cultural and Recovery Pathway Diversity’ (White, 2013, 1-2). There is a sense of comradeship and togetherness embodied during these celebrations. While participants negotiate their own treatment style, events like Recovery Walks facilitate a feeling of unity among diversity. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (2006) note that social movements are made up of ‘informal networks’ (21) and ‘collective identities...which go beyond specific events and initiatives (21). While the Recovery Walks drive a sense of shared communalism, distinct and diverse groups make up what is known as the VRM. The fact that substance use disorders are set in the context of a social movement says something about the movement and its approach to addiction. To an extent, it subverts stigmatising the individual as having failed and instead highlights the wider social context.

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<sup>92</sup> See Elayne Rapping’s *The Culture of Recovery: Making Sense of the Self-help Movement in Women’s Lives* (1996) for a discussion on 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism’s influence on the recovery movement. In many ways I also draw from a discussion around the “personal” and the “political” (1996).

<sup>93</sup> The specific principle of horizontal organising, or *horizontalidad* in Spanish, is as Marina Sitrin notes: ‘begins when people begin to solve problems themselves, without turning to the institutions that caused the problems in the first place’ (2006, 38).





*Figure 2. The 2016 National Recovery Walk begins at the Select Security Stadium in Halton. (Photograph by author, 2016.)*

During the National UK Recovery Walk organised by FAVOR UK, around five-thousand visible recovery advocates proudly walked through the streets of Halton. Following the catchy percussiveness of the Samba band leading the march, we blew whistles, clapped, and loudly cheered. Dressed in purple, the colour of recovery, we held our banners high, promoting positive messages of ambition and encouragement. We waved at Cars and passers-by and conversed with those that we walked alongside.

David Best and others note that the Recovery Movement builds a feeling of ‘contagion’ (2012, 68). The visibility and dynamism of the VRM, especially during events such as the Recovery Walks that take place during Recovery Month<sup>94</sup>, evidently address this. Trysh Travis highlights the growth of the VRM. She notes that:

what Michel Foucault has called the “swarming” of a discourse, in this case recovery’s movement from its original institutional location in the 12-Step group out into broader culture, where diverse and seemingly unrelated institutions have refined its forms and, in doing so, increased its visibility, legitimacy, and power (2009, 13).

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<sup>94</sup> The day before Recovery Month, August 31<sup>st</sup>, is International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD).

In noting the movement's development, Travis also underlines the supposed contention in negotiating 12-Step involvement within the VRM. During 12-Step meetings that I attended, such as AA and NA, it was evident that anonymity and confidentiality were taken seriously. Alcoholics Anonymous cite that anonymity 'provides protection for all members from identification as alcoholics' (AA, 2011, 5) and 'those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation' (AA, 2011, 5)<sup>95</sup>. For some participants, anonymity is framed more specifically as a 'spiritual foundation' (AA, 2011). During the National UK Recovery Walk, I was able to attend an open AA meeting. This demonstrates that, to an extent, 12-Step fellowships have been able to craft a space within the VRM. Participants nevertheless, carefully negotiate their 'spiritual anonymity' (AA, 2011) within what Dossett calls a 'realm of potential pitfalls dug by ego and complacency' (2015). Indeed, there are critiques of the VRM, like those of contemporary spirituality, that claim it is selfish, passive and consumerist<sup>96</sup>.

The VRM is not a singular entity, but consists of networks and local communities that approach recovery in diverse ways. It is however connected through social engagement and collective action. Travis notes that it has a 'decentralised' and almost 'anarchic structure' (2009, 13). In this way, it lacks substantive definition, meaning that there are no official guidelines for joining or acceptance into the movement. FAVOR UK, the leading national charity, conceptualise their mission: 'To promote the right to recovery through advocacy and education, demonstrating the power and proof of long-term recovery' (FAVOR, 2017). The VRM reflects Manuel Castells' notion of a 'Project identity' (2010, 8). Castells writes that the 'project identity' (8) emerges 'when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure' (8). For instance, activists seek to shift the

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<sup>95</sup> This is not to suggest that people in non-12-Step programs do not consider concepts such as anonymity important.

<sup>96</sup> See *recovery in the bin* <https://recoveryinthebin.org/> for an example of this.

focus away from pathologising and stigmatising substance use disorders and instead celebrate and promulgate recovery as a socially positive phenomenon. In this way, the focus is not necessarily on addiction as a disorder, but instead on recovery.

Activities and events such as the Recovery Walks, which are organised by national and local VRM advocacy groups, are both publicly and politically significant. The VRM encourages those with diverse approaches to recovery, friends, family and advocates, to join together in visible displays that signal that recovery happens. I joined in with a number of events throughout Recovery Month, including a communal sleepover. As an entry from my field diary explains:

“Members of the VRM, their family and friends, all joined together under the same roof for a communal sleepover to raise awareness of homelessness and addiction. We conversed, listened to live music and karaoke, drank juice and ate fruit provided by the stadium before settling in for a night on our makeshift beds of sleeping bags and pillows. There was around fifty of us present at the sleepover, including sons, daughters, parents, grandparents, children, and friends, all here to celebrate recovery.” (Ethnographic Field Diary, 2016)

Although communal eating has received academic attention<sup>97</sup>, little consideration has been paid to communal sleeping. Sleeping is an act which requires total relaxation and letting go to enable a state in which we are at our most private and vulnerable. While there are practical reasons for the communal sleepover, such as inexpensive accommodation, it functions in much more of a cohesive way. As an ethnographer I was, as Jeffrey Juris notes, using ‘my body as a research tool’ (2008, 21). While the potential vulnerabilities of this setting may be emphasised, especially in such a stigmatised context, participants celebrated and embodied their belonging to the VRM as a source of meaning making. Albeit loosely, the sleepover reflected the

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<sup>97</sup> Most of this research tends to be around sleep more generally or communal sleeping between couples. See Glaskin & Chenhall (2013) for an interesting anthropological assessment of sleep with some reference to communal sleeping in diverse cultures.

Durkheimian notion of a ‘moral community’ (Durkheim, 2001, xxii), manifest in collective joy, trust, respect, mutuality and reciprocity. While the grassroots spirituality of the VRM is diverse, these events reflected a sense of unified action that highlighted the intersection between personal spirituality and community. Spirituality and meaning making equipped participants with what Wilcox calls the ‘*tools* for negotiating between one’s inner sense of self and the external world’ (2009, 206). This mediation is demonstrated in participants’ engagement within the VRM as activists of visible and socially engaged recovery.



Figure 3. Local recovery communities readying themselves and their banner for the Halton Recovery Walk. (Photograph by author, 2016.)

The Recovery Walks are visible occupations of public space. Advocates mobilise to walk through the streets of a city, before commencing with further celebrations that are held nearby. The primary function of these events is to celebrate and demonstrate that recovery happens. I argue that these events, at least implicitly, are political. As Judith Butler argues: ‘acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political’ (2015, 9). By assembling and celebrating

publicly, a space often closed to those socially marginalised by their addictions, VRM activists typify the values of recovery and therefore challenge dehumanising stigma<sup>98</sup>.

Stereotypes and stigma are essential concerns addressed by the VRM. Stigma affects belief and perceptions about self-worth which are often internalised<sup>99</sup>. Furthermore, stigma reinforces devastating neoliberal policies that wound a society's most vulnerable citizens. Alongside neoliberal moral responsibility, austerity exposes individuals to structural violence which Paul Farmer describes as the 'social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way' (2006, 1686). Although addiction is prevalent among all social classes (Cloud & Granfield, 2008, 1971), many participants originated from poorer neighbourhoods and identified as having left education after secondary school. Several were also unemployed at the time of interview.

The "spice epidemic" that has emerged in cities such as Manchester is an instance of stigma and structural inequality. Terms such as "Zombie"<sup>100</sup> are explicitly dehumanising. Imogen Tyler highlights the multiple meanings of 'revolting' and 'abjection' (2013). These are 'the processes through which minoritized populations are imagined and configured as revolting and become subject to control, stigma and censure, and the practices through which individuals and groups resist' (3-4). The visibility and social engagement of the VRM challenges substance use-related stigma. While events and activities focus on celebration though social acknowledgement and inclusion (Best *et al*, 2016, 242), there is also an underlying sense of autonomy and resistance against inequality. As Judith Butler notes, when 'bodies deemed "disposable" or "ungreivable" assemble in public view...they are saying, "We have not slipped

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<sup>98</sup> This is not to argue that this is a comprehensive solution to stigma. As many commentators of social movements have noted, it is questionable as to whether they can be totally successful in their endeavours.

<sup>99</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence' describes 'the mechanism whereby the socially dominated naturalize the status quo and blame themselves for their domination, thereby rendering it legitimate' (Bourgois, 2007, 1).

<sup>100</sup> See this article from the *Guardian* (2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/06/spice-zombie-drug-devastating-communities>

quietly into the shadows of public life” (2015, 152). Furthermore, the engagement of VRM advocates within policy and practice forums as well as local and national media<sup>101</sup>, is demonstrative of a commitment and participation to purveying the visibility and energy of the movement while also challenging social stigma.



Figure 4. The National UK Recovery Walk in Halton. (Photograph by author, 2016)

David Best and colleagues argue that the VRM embodies a ‘prefigurative politics’ (2016) formed of ‘collective action’ (240), autonomous and experienced conceptions of recovery (240) and ‘social capital’ (242). VRM advocates, creatively envision an inclusive future for those suffering with addiction. Best further argues that localised recovery communities circumvent participating in professional treatment and government services, instead encouraging ownership of recovery options based experientially (240). Consequently, the VRM subverts Foucault’s notion of biopower as the ‘numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies’ (1991, 140). This would include, for instance, prescribed treatment methods by professionals. Affirming ownership over harm-reduction, and abstinence-based treatment, renders, in Best’s words ‘empowerment and ownership over the

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<sup>101</sup> This also includes media set up specifically for addiction and recovery. For example, radio stations such as <https://recoveryradio.fm/>



condition’ (240). The agency of participants, discussed in chapter three, is evident in their construction of a personal recovery narrative as well as participation in the storying of the VRM as a narrative of recovery embedded in wider-culture or what White calls a ‘collective mosaic’ (2017). This positive empowerment, I argue, challenges potential critiques of the plasticity and fluidity of postmodern, consumerist identity formations. It demonstrates that the functionality is both internal and external in the lives of participants who experience this life-changing transformation of recovery.

Further challenges have also been lodged against the VRM. Trysh Travis illustrates the feminist critique. She explains: ‘it still bears the traces of feminist consciousness-raising, but seems not to push its devotees toward collective action for social change, recovery has become a favourite scapegoat, seen as a narcissistic consumer lifestyle’ (2009, 189). While my project has not attended to the gendered aspects of recovery, I have marshalled my argument toward the view that recovery is both socially engaged and community-focused. Similarly, while critiques of spirituality argue that it is apolitical, in this section, I have demonstrated that the VRM is engaging politically in the endeavour for positive social change and human rights. Community activism is a vital and central aspect of the movement.



*Figure 5.* Celebrations in Grosvenor Park, Chester after the Recovery Walk organised by Cheshire Recovery Federation (CRF). (Photograph by author, 2016).

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have challenged critiques of contemporary spirituality that scrutinise it for being hyperindividualistic, conceited and apolitical. Using data collected during my semi-structured interviews and participant-observation, I have demonstrated that these do not apply to this case study. The grassroots spirituality of the VRM is evidently embedded within community and inter-personal interactions. Whether it is based around 12-Step or non-12-Step spirituality, it is a language that helps to shape participants' recovery. Furthermore, it is personally and collectively empowering. Constructing spirituality, albeit in diverse ways, functioned to give participants meaning in their life-changing transformations. One participant, Carmen, said: "I feel we are here, if you like, for a purpose It could be as simple as that". Alongside being embedded within communities, participants are committed to assisting and supporting others identifying with recovery, and to what extent it is possible, (re)integrating with family and wider-society. As William White notes: advocates are 'catalysts of *community healing* via their person/family-centred and broader community service work' (2013, 8). The VRM offers hope and communal belonging to those in need of provision. Indeed, this is vital. As Sociologists Cloud and Granfield note, recovery is closely linked to the 'environmental context' (2008, 1972) and the 'perceptible and imperceptible resources available' (1972). The VRM approaches recovery as a critical issue of public health. Events and activities like the Recovery Walks counter social inequalities and devastating stigma while autonomously building community capital that contributes to vital social supports that help people in need.



## **Concluding Remarks**

In this dissertation, I have argued that the language of spirituality within the Visible Recovery Movement, is functionally different to those mentioned in the critiques of contemporary spirituality (Martin, 2015; Webster, 2012; Carrette & King, 2005). These evaluations argue that it is selfish and narcissistic, and that it enables people to cope with the suffering caused by capitalism and neoliberalism, just enough that they are able to tacitly accept it. My foremost contention with this scholarship is that it uncritically universalises this view. Commentators peddle an interpretation which essentialises spirituality rather than drawing attention to its diversity in both language and functionality. This narrow representation is likewise dismissive of complicated ideas such as agency and responsibility. Critiques of spirituality also fail to give attention to that language as socially embedded. Indeed, they only seem to focus on its supposed hyperindividuality and apolitical agenda. This completely glosses over scholarship on spirituality within LGBT+, feminist, womanist and other liberationist movements.

My specific focus has been the grassroots spirituality of the Visible Recovery Movement. Drawing on data collected through the methods of semi-structured interviews and participant-observation, I have principally examined language and function. To do so, I have drawn from the tradition of phenomenology to ‘empathise’ (Cox, 2010) with participants’ accounts of their spirituality. Alongside this, I have framed my fieldwork and analysis as an activist, or in Jeffrey Juris’s words, as ‘engaged, practice-based, and politically committed’ (2007, 173). However, I have had to marshal my involvement within the VRM and events such as the Recovery Walks, alongside having a sense of scholarly distance from participants and the movement. Loïc Wacquant’s notion of ‘vulnerable observers’ (2015, 5) highlights how we as ethnographers can ‘dive into the stream of action to the greatest possible depth, rather than watch it from the bank’ (5). Concurrently, he warns against being swallowed up in the

‘whirlpool of subjectivism’ (5). Nonetheless, being an activist, at least to an extent, enables me to highlight recovery and the VRM as an issue of social justice. Furthermore, I am able to base my subjectivities in an ethical and political framework which counters critiques of scholarship that completely suspends any such judgements (Scheper-Hughs, 1995).

While spirituality is susceptible to critiques, in my case study of the VRM, participants engage with it in a functionally different way. I began by interpreting spirituality in the terms of the personal. The grassroots spirituality of the VRM is founded upon the influence of 12-Step fellowships as well as the prevalence of the SBNR among wider-culture. Although it is diffuse, varied and to an extent fluid, it functions as a source of individual power and strength. As one participant, Sofia, said: “it’s something greater than, I’m going to say the little me”. Whether it is spirituality, religiosity, humanism or other, participants seek to acquire a language, based on their experiences, which has meaning and that acts as a catalyst of empowerment and transformation. In agreement with Sociologist Lois Lee (2015), these identities are not just about making meaning for oneself, but how they are ‘lived’ socially (184). Unlike caricatures set out in the critical literature, spirituality is neither superficial nor passive. It inspires an internality and externality of change, specifically, the emotionally and physically demanding change from a substance use disorder to recovery. The existential pursuit of meaning is embodied in participants’ self-care, intra and inter-personal identity, growth of a narrative of recovery, and identification with responsibility. Those critiques that dismiss agency as a product of neoliberalism, miss its intimate functionality in negotiating daily tribulations in the endeavour for control, connection, wellbeing and recovery from addiction.

Alongside this interpretation, I also theorised the grassroots spirituality of the VRM as social. In this instance, spirituality functions to empower a positive relationality between social actors based on an externality of change. Unlike critical representations, participants are not necessarily selfish or apolitical. Indeed, they are committed to caring for, helping and

supporting their local recovery communities, making long-lasting friendships and taking the message of recovery out to potential supporters. During events such as the Recovery Walks, there is a powerful sense of creativity and comradeship among activists. There is also a prevailing logic for which participants believe that anything is possible. As David Graeber (2013) notes, ‘the moment any significant number of people shake off the shackles that have been placed on that collective imagination, even our most deeply inculcated assumptions about what is and is not politically possible have been known to crumble’ (302). It is a space of inclusivity and diversity<sup>102</sup> whereby, as White says, ‘AA and NA members would walk beside people in secular recovery [and] faith-based recovery’ (2013, 2). Spirituality mediates involvement with the VRM and its communal endeavour for positive and meaningful social change. While many participants are not necessarily politically engaged, they do to an extent at least, subvert the dominance of neoliberal hegemonic principles such as greed, egotism, self-indulgence and passivity. The extent to which activities such as the Recovery Walks are successful is questionable and difficult to measure. Nonetheless, these events do contribute to visibly storying the VRM and weaving a narrative of recovery into the fabric of wider-culture that challenges stigma and structural inequalities.

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<sup>102</sup> Further research into inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity would provide useful insight into a wider context of diversity among those identifying with the language of spirituality and in recovery.

## Appendix A

### Questions used during interviews and surveys

#### **Examining the role of ‘spirituality’ and ideas concerning ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’ amongst those in recovery from addiction.**

This research project explores ‘spirituality’, ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’ in recovery from addiction. If this is of interest to you, I would be grateful for your responses to this questionnaire. It should take 15 minutes at the most to complete. You do not have to answer all the questions. The questionnaire is anonymous. After completing it, please return it to me (Liam Metcalf-White).

Before completing the questionnaire, please ensure that you have signed a copy of the consent form and have read the attached forms. Thank you for contribution to this research project.

#### **Are you? (Please circle)**

18-25                  26-35                  36-45                  46-55                  56-65                  66+

#### **Are you? (Please circle)**

Male                  Female                  Other                  Rather not say

#### **What is your highest educational qualification? (Please circle)**

Secondary school levels                  Vocational                  GCSE or O levels                  A/AS

Undergraduate degree                  Postgraduate degree

#### **Which category best describes your employment status? (Please circle)**

Full-time employment                  Part-time employment                  Unemployed

Student                  Retired

#### **How long have you been in recovery/recovered?**

**How would you describe your recovery? (Please circle)**

In recovery

Recovered

In medication-assisted recovery

Used to have an alcohol or drug problem, but don't any more

Ex-addict or alcoholic

**Is 'spirituality' a part of your recovery? (Please circle)**

Yes

No

Maybe

Not sure

**What does 'spirituality' mean to you? (If nothing, please leave blank)**

**Is 'powerlessness' an important feature of your recovery? (Please circle)**

Yes

No

Maybe

Not sure

**If 'yes', what does it mean to you?**

**Do you think of yourself as 'empowered' in recovery? (Please circle)**

Yes

No

Maybe

Not sure

**If 'yes', how so?**

**Is telling your story important? (Please circle)**

Yes

No

Maybe

Not sure

**If 'yes', why is it important?**

**Do you think you are ‘a different person’ in recovery? (Please circle)**

Yes                  No                  Maybe                  Not sure

**If ‘yes’, please give examples**

**Are you a more responsible person in recovery? (Please circle)**

Yes                  No                  Maybe                  Not sure

**If ‘yes’, please give examples**

**Do you do any voluntary work/service? (Please circle)**

Yes                  No                  Maybe                  Not sure

**If ‘yes’, please describe**

## **Appendix B**

### **Letter of Invitation**

Liam Metcalf-White  
Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Chester  
Parkgate Road, Hollybank House  
Chester  
CH1 4BJ

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am conducting a research project as part of the requirement for a Master's degree at the University of Chester, in the department of Theology and Religious Studies.

As part of my studies, I am currently researching the role of 'contemporary spirituality' and notions of 'powerlessness', in recovery from addiction. Much contemporary research about spirituality is very negative. It claims people who engage in spirituality are passive, individualistic, and selfish. Their primary concern is with their own well-being. Some academics have argued that contemporary spirituality actually contributes to the problems of modern society by enabling people to cope with the suffering caused by capitalism just enough to keep them effectively engaged in it. My research hypothesis is that 'recovery spirituality' may offer, at least in part, an exception to this critique. People who utilise recovery spirituality do so because their lives (not just their well-being) depend upon it. Recovery spirituality, I contend, may be neither 'passive' nor 'selfish', but active and community orientated. My focus is on the variety of types of recovery spirituality - ranging from 'twelve-step' to the spirituality of visible recovery advocacy movements. Participants may appreciate the opportunity to explore and enhance the profile of the recovery movement through this project. This may lead to a greater appreciation and understanding of the mechanisms of recovery from addiction by wider society.

The purpose of this letter is to ask if you would be willing to participate in the project, either by completing a short questionnaire, or by participating in semi-structured interview of no more than 30 minutes (It is not compulsory to do both the interview and questionnaire).

If you are willing to be involved in this research it is understood that you are free to withdraw from it at any stage. All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and you will be anonymised in any write up of the research.

Please think carefully about whether you can join in this research, and let me know if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,  
Liam Metcalf-White

## **Appendix C**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

#### **Examining the role of ‘spirituality’ and ideas concerning ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’ amongst those in recovery from addiction.**

Please read this information sheet carefully. You are being invited to participate in a research project. Before you make a decision concerning your participation, it is important for you to understand why this research is being conducted and what it will involve. If there is anything that is unclear or you would like more information regarding the research, please contact the lead researcher to discuss this. Please take time to decide if you would like to be involved in this study. Thank you.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

As part of the research for a MA Religious Studies dissertation thesis, this project examines the role of ‘contemporary spirituality’ and notions of ‘powerlessness’, in recovery from addiction. Much contemporary research about spirituality is very negative. It claims people who engage in spirituality are passive, individualistic, and selfish. My research hypothesis is that ‘recovery spirituality’ may offer, at least in part, an exception to this critique. People who utilise recovery spirituality do so because their lives (not just their well-being) depend upon it. Recovery spirituality, I contend, may be neither ‘passive’ nor ‘selfish’, but active and community orientated. This project seeks to understand the association between spirituality and ‘powerlessness’ in recovery from addiction, and the implications these have for human agency.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to take part in this project because you are in recovery

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is your decision as to whether you decide to take part in this research project. If you decide to proceed, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. If at any time during the process you wish to withdraw, you are free to do so without having to provide a particular reason for this. If there are any issues or concerns that arise, you are also able to contact the lead researcher to discuss these.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be asked to sign a consent form giving your permission for the researcher to either provide you with a questionnaire to complete, or to interview you. This along with the letter of invitation, will set out how the project will protect you from any issues of confidentiality and anonymity (for example, you may choose a pseudonym). If at any point during or after the research you wish to withdraw, that is acceptable and will be granted without reason. After the data from the questionnaire and/or interview is gathered, I will attempt to contact you to show you a copy of the transcript for you to check through.

#### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Due to the sensitive nature of this research project, it is possible that you may feel discomfort when discussing some of the related issues. In this case, you will be directed towards your associated fellowship or organisation for support. As this project requires you to be in recovery, you will need to inform the researcher if this is no longer the case.



**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

By taking part in this study, you will be helping to contribute to the literature on 'spirituality' and 'powerlessness' in recovery from addiction. This is also an opportunity enhance and explore the profile of the recovery movement. This could lead to greater understanding and appreciation of the recovery movement amongst those in wider society.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact:

Professor Robert E. Warner,  
Executive Dean of Humanities,  
University of Chester  
Parkgate Road  
Chester  
CH1 4BJ  
r.warner@chester.ac.uk  
Tel. 01244 511980

**Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

All the information that this research project collects will be anonymised and kept confidential. You will be offered the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym which will be used in the written material. Only the researcher of this project will have access to this information.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The data collected in this research study will be used in the researcher's postgraduate dissertation. The research may be published in academic resources including journal articles.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is organized by the researcher (Liam Metcalf-White), under the auspices of the Higher Power Project, an established research project in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester.

**Who may I contact for further information?**

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Liam Metcalf-White,  
MA Postgraduate Student,  
University of Chester  
Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
Parkgate Road  
Chester  
CH1 4BJ  
1101782@chester.ac.uk  
07949884068

## Appendix D

### Ethical Approval from the University of Chester, Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee

Faculty of Humanities

*Dean of Humanities*

**Professor Robert E Warner**

*BA, MA, PhD, FRSA*

Direct Line 01244 511980

[r.warner@chester.ac.uk](mailto:r.warner@chester.ac.uk)

Mr. Liam Metcalf-White  
Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Chester

11<sup>th</sup> March 2016

Dear Liam,

Thank you for your submission to the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, which was considered on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2016. The Committee is conscious of the work involved in the preparation of such research proposals and is grateful for your attention to this.

The Committee has identified ambiguities within your application, and has concluded that it is able to approve only your initial ethnographic work at this stage. The Committee requests that you work with your supervisor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies to identify how best the project should proceed following the initial research and to identify a timescale for gaining full ethical approval.

Please could a joint response from you and your supervisor on this matter be submitted to Pauline Morton, Faculty Ethics Committee Secretary ([p.morton@chester.ac.uk](mailto:p.morton@chester.ac.uk)) for consideration by the Committee.

Please get in touch with Pauline if you have any queries about this letter or your next steps.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Rob Warner  
Chair of the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee

cc: Dr. Wendy Dossett

Faculty of Humanities

*Dean of Humanities*

**Professor Robert E Warner**

*BA, MA, PhD, FRSA*

Direct Line 01244 511980

[r.warner@chester.ac.uk](mailto:r.warner@chester.ac.uk)

Mr. Liam Metcalf-White  
Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Chester

25 October 2016

Dear Liam,

Thank you for the interim report on your initial exposure to the communities you will be studying and your initial data gathering. The Committee commend you for a promising start to this research project.

Because initial ethical clearance was only for this initial phase, full ethical authorisation for the project now needs to be confirmed. Depending on how the project is now shaping up, this can take one of two forms:

1. If you have completed your data gathering, you will not have to complete the full form again, but will need to provide a statement, supported by your supervisor, in two sections:
  - Final research project proposal, including the ways in which you intend to utilise the data
  - Confirmation of protection of confidentiality for consenting participants (anonymisation in the written analysis and secure retention of data)
2. If there is further qualitative material to gather, you will need to complete the full form again, including the above information and indicating what additional data you will seek gather and by what means, how you will secure further consents and how you will guarantee confidentiality.

Please get in touch if you have any queries about this letter or your next steps.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Rob Warner  
Chair of the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee  
cc: Dr. Wendy Dossett

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